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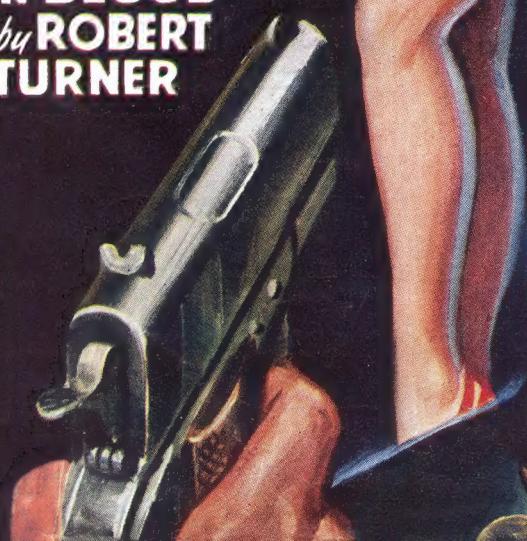
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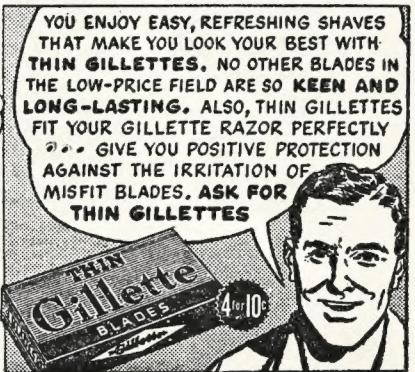
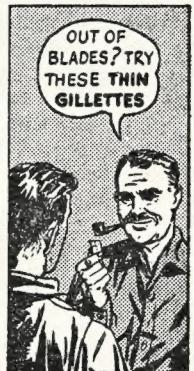
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**TOM WELCH, VACATIONING
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JUST HOOKED 'OLD CLUNKER'
THE LEGENDARY TROUT OF
BUSHNELL'S BROOK . . .**

**WHAT A
FISH!**



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Vol. 55

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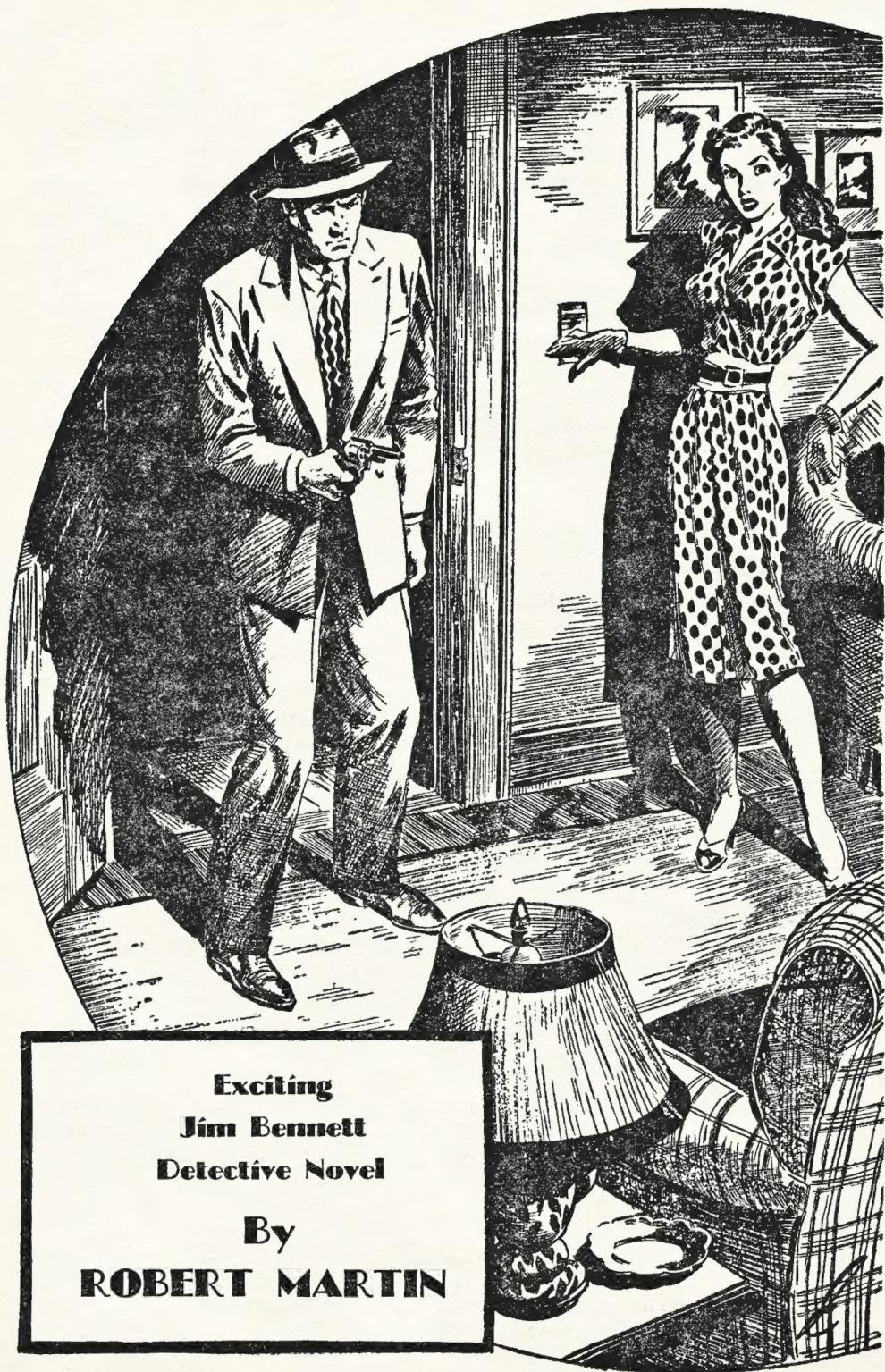
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Exciting
Jim Bennett
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By
ROBERT MARTIN

WAKE OF THE WILLFUL WIFE



Vargo stopped smiling and his left arm whipped up.



When Private Detective Jim Bennett shadowed his friend's whiskey-wild wife, he never figured he was guiding a knife into her husband's throat.

CHAPTER ONE

Whiskey-Wild Honey

ONE night in September a fellow came around to the apartment and sold me some retirement insurance. I don't know what business a private dick has with retirement insurance, but he was a nice fellow, and I bought some. Then I had to take a physical examination, and so the next night I went around to see Doc Valentine.

There were three women ahead of me. Paula Stark, Doc's combination nurse and receptionist, was behind her desk in a corner. She was about twenty-five, dark, not

thin, and with good legs, thick black hair and a generous red mouth. She was wearing a trim white nurse's uniform with a dinky white starched cap perched on her black hair. She gave me a friendly wink, and I sat down in a chair beside her desk. It was then that I noticed the diamond ring on her left hand.

"It's a dirty trick," I said. "You know I would have asked you sooner or later. Who's the lucky guy?"

Paula was a smart girl who knew most of the answers, but she still knew how to blush. Then she laughed, a little nervously, I thought. A bell wired to the side of her desk tinkled gently, and she stood up and nodded at one of the women. "You may go in now, Mrs. Bowers," she said.

The two other women in the room looked over the tops of their magazines. Mrs. Bowers heaved herself out of her chair and waddled to the door of the doctor's office. Paula ushered her inside and sat down at her desk again. She said to me in an undertone: "He's trying to break her of the chocolate-eclair habit."

"Don't change the subject," I said. "Who is he?"

She looked at me a little defiantly. "Jed Vargo."

I knew Jed Vargo. A kind of a character around town. He looked and dressed like a grown-up college boy. Big and blond, with blue eyes and a friendly smile. He didn't work, as far as I knew, and yet he always seemed to do all right. He drove a Buick convertible, played the races, got around town a lot, could drop five hundred in a poker game and laugh about it. He had been married once to night club singer who had since become a famous movie actress. I ran into him occasionally, but I was never friendly with him. There was always a kind of a cold look behind his eyes, and he was a little too smooth, a little too hello-pal-how-have-you-been? But I could understand how a girl like Paula Stark would like him. I had gone around a little with Paula, and we had had some good times, but I don't have time to get serious over any girl.

"Didn't know you knew Jed," I said carelessly.

"I haven't—very long," she said. "But long enough. Get that look off your face."

"What look?"

"That disapproving look. You'd like Jed—if you knew him."

"No doubt," I said. "Lots of happiness. Do I get to kiss the bride-to-be?"

There was a rustling of paper, and I caught the two women peering over their magazines again. I winked at them, and the magazines went back up. Paula frowned at me, put a finger to her lips and shook her head silently. The bell tinkled again, and I knew that Doc had ushered Mrs. Bowers out of his side entrance. The two women stood up and marched side by side across the room. Paula opened the door for them, and sat down. She sighed, took off her white cap, and ran long, slender fingers through her thick hair. Then she took a cigarette from a package in her desk. I held a match for her.

"Sisters," she said. "Maiden ladies. They always have the same thing wrong with them—at the same time. I hope that's all for tonight."

"What about me?" I asked. "I'm a patient."

She laughed. "There's nothing wrong with you. You probably bought some more insurance." She stopped laughing and looked at the tips of her un-painted finger nails. "Jim, what have you got against Jed Vargo?"

"Nothing—except that he's going to marry you."

She frowned. "Seriously, Jim. I've known you—how long? Ever since I came to work for the doctor. I was just a small-town girl, fresh out of training in a Columbus hospital. One night you came in here and I helped to dress a bullet wound in your side. I was scared to death—I thought you were a gangster. Afterwards, the doctor told me who you were, and what you did, and—and I guess I've been a little in love with you ever since. . . ."

"A fine time to tell me," I said.

"I want you to like him, Jim," she said.

"Sure," I said. "Like a brother."

She looked at me quickly, and her lips parted as if to speak. Then she turned away from me and slowly crushed her cigarette in an ash tray. When she turned her face towards me again, her eyes were moist. "I love him, Jim. He's big and kind, and his voice—and the way he looks at me. . . ."

I felt uncomfortable. "Jed's all right," I

said. "You two will get along fine."

Suddenly she smiled. "Thanks." She leaned towards me. "Do you want that kiss now? Jed won't care."

I didn't see any point in being kittenish. "What if he does?" I said, and I leaned forward and kissed her. It was a nice kiss, soft and cool. Only right in the middle of it I heard the outer door open. I moved my mouth away from Paula's, and I saw a man standing in the doorway.

THREE was a half smile on his face. He closed the door quietly and leaned against it, his hands in his pockets. He was wearing a dark brown felt hat, a gray herring-bone suit with lovingly tailored shoulders, and thirty-dollar shoes burnished to the color of an old saddle. He took off his hat, and his thick yellow hair glinted in the light. His wide blue eyes had an amused look in them. He had clear, sun-burned skin, a straight nose and a square chin. As far as looks went, I didn't blame Paula Stark for falling for him.

"Hello, Bennett," he said, still smiling.

I said: "You've got a nice girl here, Jed. Keep her that way."

He sauntered over to the desk. "Honey," he said to Paula. "I love you very much, but I don't approve of your kissing private dicks." He winked at me, and brushed a big fist lightly across her chin. "I came to take you home." He turned to me again, still smiling. "That is, if it's all right with you, Bennett?"

"She doesn't work for me," I said.

"I've been trying to get her to quit this two-bit job," he said.

"We've gone over that, Jed," Paula said. "The doctor needs me, and I'm staying until he can get someone else."

Jed Vargo grinned at me. "You can see who's boss."

The door opened, and Doc stepped out into his reception room. Dr. John Valentine. A short man, nearing forty, with the thick body of a wrestler. Black hair, thinning on the top of his head, a strong, tough-looking face. Heavy jaws, thick short nose, rather wide lips, intelligent black eyes behind dark-rimmed glasses. His hands were big and clean-looking, with coarse black hair on the backs of them. His double-breasted gray flannel suit accentuated his thick build.

He nodded pleasantly at the three of us, and the light glinted on his glasses. "Are you the last victim for tonight, Jim?"

Paula said: "He's the last, Doctor."

Dr. Valentine stood aside. I got out of my chair and moved past him into the inner office. I sat down in a leather chair beside Doc's big, glass-topped desk. He spoke briefly to Jed Vargo and Paula Stark, and then he came in and closed the door. He sat down at his desk, laid a long blue form in front of him, and unscrewed the cap of a gold fountain pen.

"Buying more insurance, I see, Jim," he said.

"A guy got me in a weak moment," I said.

He smiled. "Again?" He began to write on the form. Presently he asked: "Do you use alcohol?"

"Occasionally," I said. "When I'm forced into it."

He sighed and said: "They could hang me for this." I saw him write, "Moderate," on the form.

The telephone on his desk jangled. He picked it up, said: "Dr. Valentine."

In the quiet office I heard the voice coming very clearly over the wire: *Doc, it's bad news again. We picked her up driving without lights on the East Side. We've got her here at the station. She isn't fit to drive.* . . .

Dr. Valentine seemed to slump in his chair. "All right, Sergeant," he said wearily. "I'll be down. Thanks."

He replaced the telephone on its cradle and screwed the cap back on his pen. "I'm sorry, Jim," he said. "I'll have to leave. We'll finish this later."

"Sure, Doc," I said. I hesitated. I liked Dr. Valentine. He had pulled me through a couple of bad times, and as far as I was concerned there wasn't enough money in Cleveland to pay his fees. "It's none of my business," I said, "but I heard what the Sergeant said. If I can help . . . ?"

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. "Thanks, Jim. I appreciate that. But there's nothing you can do—or anybody. I—I don't know what's happened to Virginia. It's been hell these past few months." He sighed and hooked the bows of his glasses over his small flat ears.

I knew about Virginia Valentine. A

good-looking blonde, with gray eyes and long legs. She was about ten years younger than Doc. And a year ago, I remembered, their first child, a girl, had died at birth. It had done something to Virginia Valentine—or something had. Anyhow, since then she had been hitting the high spots. I had seen her a few times lately, too drunk to recognize me, in the fancier saloons around town. She had always been alone—at least, at the times I had seen her. I felt sorry for her, but I felt a lot sorrier for Doc.

"You'll need someone to drive her car home," I said. "I can do that."

Doc Valentine stood up. "Jim, if you're sure you don't mind. . . ."

He locked his office, and we went down in the elevator to the street.

TH E cops were nice about it. Doc Valentine had a good reputation in Cleveland, and he had served as assistant medical examiner in the days when he was starting his practice. We got his wife out of the station and into Doc's Packard coupe without too much trouble. Drunks are pretty much alike, no matter who they are.

I got behind the wheel of her Mercury convertible and followed Doc across town to his home beyond the Heights. He had a nice layout—a big white, sprawled-out house with lots of lawn and a tennis court. I braked the Mercury beside Doc's Packard in a big garage, and I helped him to steer his wife up a flagstone walk into a rear door of the house. We went through a green and white kitchen, crossed a darkened dining room and entered a long living room with bare polished floors, white shaggy rugs and a huge plate glass window fitted into most of one wall. There was a stone fireplace at one end of the room, with a white leather chair beside it.

Sitting quietly in this chair was a dark young man with thick black hair combed straight back from his broad forehead. He had a rather long nose, slightly aquiline; black eyes; heavy black brows; and a full red-lipped mouth. He looked like he needed a shave, but I guessed that he always looked that way. He was wearing a dark gray suit, a white shirt with a stiff collar, a blue and gray striped necktie, black shoes. A black Homburg hat lay on the floor beside him.

As Doc and I entered, supporting Vir-

ginia Valentine between us, the young man got quickly to his feet and smiled a little uncertainly. He was tall and well built.

Doc said: "Hello, Mark," and he kept moving towards a door beyond the fireplace. To me he said in a low voice: "I can handle her now, Jim."

I let go of the girl's arm. Doc picked her up in his arms and carried her through the door. Her yellow hair fell away from her head and I saw that her eyes were closed. I turned and looked at the dark young man, who was still standing beside his chair.

"Is—is she ill?" he asked me. He had a soft, rich voice, with a whisper of an accent.

"Yeah," I said.

He opened his mouth, and closed it again. Then he said: "I'm Dr. Andros. I was waiting to see Dr. Valentine."

I guessed him to be about thirty. At close range his eyes were large and liquid-looking. And I had been right about his shaving. His skin was smooth, but the roots of his beard showed bluish-black, like the pin-feathers of a dressed chicken. He offered me a cigarette from a brown leather case. I took one and he flicked flame from a silver lighter. I inhaled. Turkish tobacco.

"Thanks," I said. "Doc'll be back in a minute. My name's Bennett."

He smiled a little shyly, and held out his hand. I took it. The skin was soft and smooth, but his fingers were long and strong.

Doc Valentine came back into the room and closed the door softly behind him. He lowered himself into a deep chair and sighed. There was the pallor of fatigue on his face.

The dark man stooped and picked up his Homburg. "I wanted to see you, Doctor, but some other time will do as well. The door was open, and I thought that perhaps you would be back soon. . . ." He moved towards the door.

Doc Valentine held up a hand. "Virginia never closes doors. Stick around, Mark. This is my friend, Jim Bennett."

Dr. Andros said: "We've met. I hope—that Mrs. Valentine—"

"She'll be all right, Mark," Doc said, a little sharply, I thought. "What's on your mind? Get hold of something that isn't in the book?"

"Really," Dr. Andros said, "it's not important. Tomorrow, perhaps. . . ."

Doc managed a smile. "All right, Mark. I'm making house calls in the morning, but I'll be in the office after one o'clock. Will your patient live that long?"

"I hope so, Sir," Dr. Andros said, smiling. He nodded at me and hurried out.

Doc Valentine slumped deeper into his chair. "Mark's all right," he said. "But I've got enough on my mind without worrying about his over-due baby cases. Women always figure it wrong. But he'll learn."

I said: "I'll be running along, Doc."

He sat up in his chair. "No, don't go yet, Jim. Sit down. I'll make us a drink."

I looked at his pale puffy face. "You're working too hard, Doc," I said.

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Yes. I know it. Most of us do. But people depend on us, and I can't get hard-boiled enough to say 'no.'"

He left the room and came back in a few minutes with two tall, tinkling glasses. He handed me one and sank into his chair. He drank half of the contents of his glass without lowering it. Then he leaned his head back in the chair and closed his eyes. He said: "Jim, what in hell am I going to do?"

HE HAD me there. I lit a cigarette. "She's a grown woman," I said. "And if she wants to drink herself to death, nothing will keep her from doing it—unless you keep her locked up."

"I can't do that," he said. He paused. "I don't know what happened to her. It isn't just the baby's death. . . ."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

He opened his eyes and finished his drink in two swallows. He stood up and took my glass. It was still half full. "I'll sweeten it up," he said. He started out of the room. At the doorway he turned. "It started before that—the baby, I mean," he said quietly. "But it got worse afterwards. If it was just liquor—well, I could handle that, I think. Virginia and I have been married for fourteen years, ever since I graduated from medical school. We met in Columbus—that's where her family used to live." He paused. "Can I cry on your shoulder a little, Jim?"

"Yes, Doc," I said. "That's my business."

"Thanks. But I want you to know all of it." He leaned against the wall of the

archway and looked down at the glasses in his hands. He slowly swished the melting ice around in one of them. "We damn near starved the first year," he went on. "But she helped me. I don't know what I would have done without her—probably have given up and taken a routine job in a hospital. That was a bad year. I owed for my instruments, drugs, car—everything. Some months we ate hot dogs so that we could pay the office rent. We lived in a room behind the office, in a fire trap over on the south side. It was slim pickings. But it was fun. Later on, when things got better, I moved up town and I hired a nurse—the girl I have now, Paula Stark. But it was never quite the same between Virginia and me after that. I suppose it was my fault. I got busier and busier, and we drifted apart. We thought that maybe a baby would help. It did—until it was born dead. After that. . . ." He sighed and shrugged his heavy shoulders. He looked up at me suddenly. "Well, it's a long time between drinks." He went out.

There wasn't a sound from the room into which Doc had carried his wife. I sprawled in my chair and looked at the toes of my dusty brown shoes and thought about people and stuff. Doc came back in with two fresh drinks and sat down.

I said: "If I can do anything. . . ."

He took off his glasses and began to wipe them a handkerchief. "Jim, I've been thinking," he said. "I don't blame Virginia—it's my fault for neglecting her. She used to know every symptom of all my patients, when little Joey Doakes was due for his typhoid shots, what house calls were really necessary—all the stuff that Paula does now. Now I only see Virginia at odd hours. I've left her too much to herself."

"Take her away," I said. "You've got a place up along the lake, haven't you?"

"I've thought about that," he said. "But I never seem to be able to get away. I've got so many people depending upon me."

"To hell with that," I said. "They can find another doctor. Take her away, get acquainted with her again."

He smiled grimly. "I've got appointments for a month ahead."

"Cancel 'em," I said.

"I can't do that, Jim."

Neither of us said anything for a couple of minutes. I stared at my shoes and Doc

rattled in cracked ice in his tall glass. After a while, he said: "Jim."

"Yeah."

"How about you watching her for a week or so? Just keep track of her, and keep her out of trouble?"

I didn't say anything.

"At your regular rates, of course," he said.

"It isn't that," I said. "When do you want me to start?"

"Now. Tonight. I'll wind things up in a week and take her away. But I'm afraid to leave her alone for even a day—and there's no one I can trust. . . ."

"I've got to go to Elyia tomorrow," I told him. "Big steel man being blackmailed down there, and I've already collected an advance on the job. But I can wind it up in a day, I think. After that, I'll be glad to help."

"What about tonight—and tomorrow?" he asked.

"I've got a man for you," I said. I got up and crossed the room to the telephone.

CHAPTER TWO

A Husband Gets His

DON PARKS was big and darkly handsome, with high cheek bones and closely clipped black hair. He looked a little like an Indian. He had shoulders like a full back, and had been an All-Ohio track star in college. He had studied for law, worked at it a while, gave it up, drifted to New York, worked with an advertising agency for a few years and then decided that he wanted to be a private detective. He applied to the boss in New York, and the boss liked his looks, sent him through the agency's training school. He had a good record of two years work on the East Coast before he was assigned to the Cleveland office a week ago. Before sending him out to me, the boss had called and said that Parks had asked to be transferred to Cleveland because Ohio was his home state and he would have a chance to get to Columbus once in a while to see his folks. He was staying at a downtown hotel until he found a permanent room, and I called there.

He wasn't in his room, and I told the clerk to page him. I waited, and pretty

soon his deep voice said: "Parks speaking."

"Sonny, this is Bennett."

"Hi, Boss."

"I've got a job for you. Get one of the Fords out of the garage and come out here right away." I gave him Doc Valentine's address.

"Yes, Sir," he said briskly, and hung up.

Doc and I had time for another drink, and I told him about Don Parks. He seemed satisfied, and pretty soon the door chimes let loose. I let Parks in and introduced him to Doc.

"He doesn't look like a detective," Doc said.

Parks smiled at him, and looked at me, waiting for the tip-off.

I gave him the deal as briefly and as tactfully as possible. When I had finished, he nodded. "I watch this house," he said. "If Mrs. Valentine goes out, I follow her, no matter what time of the day or night. I don't speak to her, or let her know I'm following her. I just watch her and try and keep her out of trouble. If necessary, I call Dr. Valentine."

"That's right," I said. "I'll relieve you at six. I'm leaving town later in the morning, but it'll give you a chance to get a couple of hours sleep. If you have to leave here before six—well, you don't get any sleep. Got it?"

"Yes, Sir," he said. He went out.

The telephone rang. Doc Valentine answered it, talked briefly. "I've got to go out, Jim. I've been expecting it—maybe have to operate before morning. You drive Virginia's car home. I'll have it picked up tomorrow." He hesitated. "This young Parks is—reliable?"

"The boss doesn't pick any other kind," I said.

He nodded. "Well, it'll only be for tonight and tomorrow."

We walked out to the garage together. He backed his black Packard coupe out and drove away. I followed in his wife's Mercury. Doc turned the corner ahead of me and headed south. I swung north, towards the city. As I passed under the street light, a man stepped from the curb and held up his arm. I stopped.

It was Dr. Mark Andros.

He leaned in the window. The light slanted through the windshield across his

dark face. I smelled the sweetish odor of Turkish tobacco. "Mr. Bennett," he said, "may I speak with you for a few minutes?"

"Sure," I said. "Hop in. I'll run you home."

He opened the door and got in beside me. "I live but a short distance," he said. "*The Erie Arms.* Two blocks down."

I put the Mercury in gear and moved down the street. Dr. Andros sat stiffly beside me. He didn't say anything, and I waited. Two blocks down I saw a neon sign: *The Erie Arms*. I braked the Mercury in front of it.

Dr. Andros said: "Is Mrs. Valentine—all right?"

"Sure," I said. "It was nothing serious."

He laughed nervously. "I was rather worried about her. That's why I came to Dr. Valentine's house tonight...."

"And not to ask Doc's advice about one of your patients?"

HE SHOOK his head slowly. "No, not this time, although Dr. Valentine has been very kind and helpful. I've been practicing but a few months, and Dr. Valentine has been generous enough to advise me on several occasions. He is a fine gentleman, a brilliant physician and surgeon. I am very fortunate to have him for a friend. And Mrs. Valentine is a lovely person. But she is not happy. I feel very sorry for her." He paused and lit a long, oval-shaped cigarette.

I waited.

Dr. Andros turned his dark face towards me. "You are a friend of Dr. Valentine's?"

I nodded.

"And of Mrs. Valentine's?"

"Look, Doctor," I said. "What's on your mind?"

"Don't be offended, Mr. Bennett," he said hastily. "It's just that I want to help. You appeared to be a friend...."

"Of Doc's," I said. "I don't know his wife very well."

He sighed. "It's tragic—about her. I had dinner in a grille on Carnegie Avenue tonight. While I was there, Mrs. Valentine came in. She was alone, and—she had been drinking. It was very obvious. But she sat quietly at the bar and drank many cocktails—martinis, I think. She didn't see me. When she left, I realized that she was in

no condition to drive a car. I followed her in my car, but she drove too fast, and I lost her in the traffic. I drove around, looking for her. And then I went to her home to wait. I—I wanted to be sure that she got home safely...."

"You don't have to explain to me," I said.

"Would you mind telling me where you found her?" he asked.

"The police picked her up. I was in Dr. Valentine's office, and I went with him and drove her car home."

"It was kind of you," he said quietly. "Do you think she will be all right?"

"Sure," I said. "She'll have an awful hangover tomorrow, but she'll get over it."

"Until the next time," he said bitterly.

I pressed the starter button. "Yeah. Until the next time."

He opened the door and stepped out to the sidewalk. "Thank you, Mr. Bennett. Perhaps we shall meet again."

"Perhaps," I said, and I pulled away.

I drove back past Dr. Valentine's house. I spotted the agency Ford parked beneath the shadows of the trees across the street. I drove on past to the next block, turned, cut the Mercury's lights, and parked. I got out and walked back up the street to the Ford. I avoided the sidewalk and kept to the grass. I moved up close, very quietly, and peered at the car from behind a hedge along the sidewalk. I could barely see the dark outline of Don Parks' head and shoulders behind the wheel. I crouched behind the hedge and watched.

"Hi, Boss," Don Parks said.

I stood up, moved over to the car and leaned in the open window. "You made a nice target," I said.

I saw his teeth flash in the gloom. "So did you," he said.

I reached across him and flicked on the dash light. He had a pearl-handled short-barreled .32 cradled in the crook of his left arm with the muzzle just below the edge of the open window.

"Ready for me, huh?" I grinned at him. "I can see that the boss trained you good. Did you recognize the car when I went past?"

He nodded. "Sure. I knew it was you snooping around. But I wanted to show you that I was on the job." He slid the .32 into his shoulder clip.

"Why didn't you take one of the guns from the office," I asked him, "instead of carrying that cap pistol?"

He patted his left arm pit and grinned. "I'll stick to Agnes."

"I thought all you young dicks called a rod your 'Betsy'?"

"I knew a girl in Columbus once," he said. "Her name was Agnes. She was dynamite." He laughed softly.

"All quiet," I asked.

He nodded. "As the grave. Can I play the radio?"

"Keep it low," I said.

He turned off the dash light. "What kind of a looker is this Mrs. Valentine?"

"Blonde," I said.

"They always are." He laughed in the darkness.

"About thirty-two or three. Five foot four, around a hundred and ten. Gray eyes, thin nose, slightly tilted, a cute mole on her left cheek."

"Hmmmm," Don Parks said.

"Watch her good," I said. "Doc's a friend of mine."

"Roger," he said.

I left him then, and walked back to the Mercury. On the way to my apartment I stopped and had two hamburgers and some coffee. When I got home, I couldn't sleep. Maybe it was the coffee. Around five in the morning I got up, shaved, showered, made myself some breakfast, and drove out to Dr. Valentine's house.

IT WAS still dark when I pulled up behind the agency Ford and turned out the Mercury's lights. Don Parks got out of the Ford and walked back.

"Doc come home yet?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Anything happen at all?"

"A Buick convertible parked in front of the house around five-thirty. There was a man driving. A woman got out and went in. She turned on the lights, stayed about two minutes, and came back out. The man waited in the car. Then they drove away —north. I sneaked across the street and got the license number." He handed me a slip of paper.

"Nice work," I said. "Then what happened?"

"After the Buick left, I went in. The door was unlocked. I used my flash. Mrs.

Valentine was still lying on the bed asleep. There was no one else in the house."

"Is that all?"

"Just about—except at three o'clock a man walked slowly past the house a couple of times. Then he ducked back towards the garage. I snooped around back there, and I even went through the house again, but I didn't see him. He must have seen me and cut across the back lots to the next block."

"What did he look like?" I asked.

"It was pretty dark—but he was a big man. Dark suit and a Homburg hat."

"Andros," I said.

"Who?"

"An M.D. down the street. He's in love with Mrs. Valentine, and he pesters Doc with requests for advice in order to be near her. He gave me a story tonight about wanting to help her because he feels indebted to Doc. He's harmless—I think, Mrs. Valentine didn't leave the house?"

"If she did," Parks said, "she went out through a tunnel."

"All right," I said. "Get some breakfast and a couple of hours sleep. I'll stick around until ten."

"Roger," he said. He got into the Ford and drove away.

I smoked cigarettes and listened to the early morning news. It wasn't quite dawn when Doc Valentine's black Packard coupe came up the street and turned into the driveway in back of his house. I heard the kitchen door slam and lights came on briefly inside the house. They went out, and I looked at my wrist watch. Six-thirty. I sighed, and decided that as far as working hours were concerned I would rather be a private dick than a doctor.

After that there was nothing but still gray shadows and the slow creeping of daylight over the street. At a quarter of seven a swift shadowy movement caught my eye. A man was hurrying across the grass from behind Doc's house. I sat up straight and watched. He crossed the street in front of me and headed away from me, walking fast. He was wearing a dark suit and a Homburg hat.

I slid out of the Mercury, gently closed the door, and started up the street in the dim, gray light. I walked on the grass beside the walk and I followed him for two blocks. He turned in at *The Erie Arms*. I

stood outside beside some shrubbery and watched him as he entered the lighted foyer. He paused before a row of mail boxes, peered through the glass window of one, lit a cigarette, and went up the stairs without looking back. When he was out of sight, I slipped inside, tip-toed across the foyer to the stairs. There was no elevator. I heard his steps above and I sneaked up the stairs, hugging the wall. The odor of Turkish tobacco was strong.

In the hallway at the top of the stairs I paused. I heard the sound of a key in a lock and I peeked around the corner. He unlocked an apartment door, entered, and the door closed behind him. I moved swiftly down the hall, glanced at the number on the door. It was 2-C. I went back down the stairs and stopped before the row of mail-boxes. The name under the box marked 2-C was *M. X. Andros, M.D.* It was seven minutes to seven.

I hurried back to the Mercury and resumed my vigil. At nine o'clock I heard the whine of a car starter, and Doc Valentine's Packard backed out of the drive and headed towards the boulevard. The sun was shining now, and I saw that Virginia Valentine was behind the wheel.

I gave her half a block lead—I didn't want her to spot her own car. I needn't have worried. She drove fast, edging the lights. She turned left on the Ridge Road. A mile down the road she wheeled the Packard into a gravel parking space beside a low, yellow stucco building. A sign over the door read: *The Ranch House, Steaks and Chicken Dinners, Liquor.* She got out of the Packard and walked fast across the gravel to the door and went in. I parked the Mercury and got out. There was a Buick convertible parked beside the rear corner of the building. The numbers on its license plate looked familiar. I took out the slip of paper Don Parks had given me. The numbers checked.

I went inside. It was like a million other places—a bar, small dance floor, booths along one wall, a juke box. Most of the chairs were on the tables, and a tired-looking man was slowly pushing a soggy mop around on the floor. There was a thin, hollow-cheeked man washing glasses behind the bar. Sitting in the back booth, facing me, was a man. It was Jed Vargo. All I could see of Virginia Valentine was

one nylon-clad leg and a stubby high-heeled brown shoe.

I walked back to the booth. Vargo nodded at me and smiled. This morning he was wearing a greenish tweed coat and a pale green sport shirt with the collar buttoned at the neck, no necktie. His thick yellow hair was neatly combed and his blue eyes were clear, with faintly amused wrinkles at the corners. He was drinking coffee.

"Up early, aren't you?" he said, still smiling. He made a move to get out of the booth, but I held up a palm. "Do you know Mrs. Valentine?" he asked.

Virginia Valentine coughed nervously into a fist and glanced up at me. There were black half moons under her gray eyes, and the freshly applied lipstick looked like blood against her thin white face. A glass of whiskey and a glass of water were on the table in front of her. There was a vacant expression in her eyes.

"Virginia, this is Mr. Bennett," Vargo said politely.

"Good morning," I said to her.

She frowned, and her eyes focused slowly. With a rising inflection, she said: "Bennett? . . . You're a friend of John's, aren't you?"

"That's right," I said.

SHE coughed into her fist again. Then she lifted the glass of whiskey and drank it in one swallow. She squeezed her eyes shut and coughed again. She carefully lowered the glass to the table.

"Little drink," she gasped. "Join us?"

"No thanks," I said. "I just stopped in to make a phone call."

She fixed her eyes on Vargo and held up her empty glass. "More," she said.

"Excuse me," I said to the two of them. Vargo nodded and winked, but Virginia Valentine had apparently forgotten about me. I moved across the room to a phone booth in a corner. I called Don Parks at his hotel. He answered immediately.

"Wake you up?" I asked.

"No, Boss. I was just getting ready to shove off."

I told him where I was and why. "I'll watch her until you get here," I said.

"Roger," he said, and hung up.

When I came out of the booth, Vargo was standing by the table. "Glad to have

seen you, Virginia," he was saying. "When Paula and I are married, you and Doc come and see us."

She didn't answer him. He winked at me again and moved to the door. I followed him. "It's a damn shame," he said to me in a low voice. "Tough on Doc."

"Yeah," I said. "You just happen by?"

He balanced himself lightly on the balls of his feet and looked at me in amusement. His face smiled, but his eyes didn't. "I could ask you the same question," he said.

"What were you doing at Doc Valentine's house around five-thirty this morning?" I asked him.

He stopped teetering on his toes, but he still smiled. "The great Bennett," he said nastily. "Sees all, knows all. Yes, I was at Doc's house at five-thirty this morning. I was on an errand of mercy. The hospital was trying to locate him. No answer at his house, and so they called Paula Stark. Paula didn't know where he was, either. And so she called me and I drove her out." He jerked his head towards the booth where Virginia Valentine sat. "Paula found her on a bed. She couldn't wake her, and Doc wasn't there. They got another doctor, but the patient died. O.K.?"

"And you just happened to meet her in this dump this morning?"

"Sure," he said. "I'm on my way to Painesville to see a guy. Is that O.K. too?"

"Give my regards to Paula," I said.

He nodded at me. His eyes were humorous and mocking. He went out. I walked back to the booth and sat down. Virginia Valentine sat with her head back and her eyes closed.

"Why do you do it?" I said.

She opened her eyes slowly, but she didn't move her head. "I'm no good," she said.

"Let me take you home," I said.

She closed her eyes again. "Go away," she said in a tired voice. "Leave me alone."

I got up, moved over to the bar. I laid some money down and jerked my head at the booth. "No more," I said to the bartender in a low voice. He nodded glumly, and I went outside to wait for Don Parks.

In a few minutes the agency Ford turned in off the Ridge Road and stopped beside Doc Valentine's Packard. Don Parks got out and came over to me. He had shaved and changed to a gray tweed suit. He

looked more than ever like a college full-back.

I grinned at him. "Good morning. Why do you always say, 'Roger'? Were you in the army?"

He shook his head. "Nope. They wouldn't take me. Trick knee. Landed the wrong way on a pole vault once. But I used to pal around with a couple of pilots in New York. I guess I got it from them." He laughed, and lit a cigarette. "Parks reporting for duty, Sir. What are your orders?"

"She's inside," I told him. "Starting all over again. She wouldn't let me take her home. Try and keep her out of trouble. Call the office at five o'clock, and if Hammond is in from the Toledo job he'll relieve you. If he isn't, you'll have to stick on it until I get back from Elyria tonight."

He nodded at the Packard. "She's driving the doctor's car, I see."

"That's right. I've got to get her Mercury back to Doc—if he's still home. If you get stuck, call Sandy at the office. She'll know what to do."

He grinned at me. "Roger," he said.

It was ten-thirty in the morning when I stopped once more in front of Doc Valentine's house. I rang the bell and waited. I could hear the whine of a vacuum cleaner inside. I rang again, and the whine died. The door opened, and a scraggly-haired skinny woman peered out at me.

"Is the doctor at home?"

"He's always gone before this," she said, "but I ain't cleaned his room yet. Sometimes he sleep late—if folks get sick at night."

"Look and see. If he's still sleeping, don't wake him. When he gets up, tell him his wife's car is out in front. I'll wait."

She opened the screen door for me, and I stepped inside to the long living room and lowered myself into the white leather chair by the fireplace. The woman went down a carpeted hall, and I could hear her bony knuckles rapping on a door. She rapped again, a little louder, and then I heard the faint click of a latch. There was silence after that for maybe thirty seconds. And then something started on a low hoarse note and climbed fast to a soprano screech.

I froze to my ankles. It took me maybe a second to realize that the skinny woman

was screaming fit to split her throat. I jumped out of the chair and ran down the hall. The skinny woman was standing before an open door. She was making gurgling sounds and biting the back of her hand. I moved fast into the room.

Doc Valentine lay on his back on the bed. He was fully dressed. The black handle of a knife protruded from his neck just below his left ear.

CHAPTER THREE

Death—and a Doll

THREE was a thudding sound behind me. I spun around. The skinny woman was slumped on her knees against the wall. She slid slowly to the carpet and lay still. I let her lay and moved slowly to the bed. There was a lot of blood. Doc was very dead.

A jangling sound let loose beside me. I jumped, my nerves twanging. Then I took a deep breath and stood still. The phone was on the table beside the head of the bed. I got the phone to my ear and I said, "Hello," in an unsteady voice.

A woman's voice said: "Darling, Darling, come and get me."

"Where are you?" I asked.

"At *The Ranch House*—on the Ridge Road. Darling, I need you...."

"All right," I said. My voice cracked, and I tried it again. "All right. Stay there."

There was a pause, and then Virginia Valentine's voice said: "John—is it you . . . ?"

I hung up. I heard a sighing sound behind me. The skinny woman was stirring a little. She began to moan. I stepped out into the hall, picked her up and stood her on her feet. I grasped her chin and shook her head. She batted her eyes at me and started to scream. I shook her by the shoulders until she stopped. She swung her head towards the bedroom door, and I pushed her violently down the hall. She stumbled ahead of me, sobbing.

I grasped her arm and led her into the living room. I pushed her down on a fawn-tinted divan, said: "Stay there," and headed for the kitchen. I found a bottle of scotch in a cupboard, and a couple of glasses. I carried them back into the living

room, poured the skinny woman a stiff drink, and one for myself. She drank her's in one swallow, shuddered, and huddled on the divan. I sipped at mine, walked around the room and tried to decide what to do.

I said to the woman: "What time did you come here this morning?"

"T-ten o'clock." Her eyes were on the bottle.

I poured her another drink. "You didn't see Doc—or hear anything?"

She cuddled the glass in her hands and shut her eyes. She shook her head violently back and forth. "She was gone," she said. "I—I didn't hear a peep from his room...." She drank the scotch too fast and began to cough.

I sighed and moved to the telephone. I called Homicide, asked for Detective Sergeant Rockingham. When he answered, I told him all about it and hung up before he had a chance to ask questions.

I said to the skinny woman: "The police will be here in a few minutes. Tell them I'll be back."

She looked at me with wide eyes. "Mister, are you gonna leave me here?"

"It'll just be a couple of minutes. Don't move around, or touch anything."

She didn't answer. As I went out the door she was reaching for the bottle of scotch with a trembling hand.

I headed the Mercury for the Ridge Road, and the traffic lights were just three pretty colors to me. When I slid the tires on the gravel beside *The Ranch House*, I saw that the Packard was gone. So was the agency Ford. I went inside. The white-haired bartender was leaning on the bar reading the morning paper.

"The blonde," I said. "How long ago did she leave?"

"Five, ten minutes. I didn't give her no more to drink. She made a phone call, and then she screamed."

"Does she come in here often?" I asked.

He looked at me blankly. "I wouldn't know, Mister."

I laid a five dollar bill on the bar. He picked it up and put it in his shirt pocket. He carefully folded his newspaper. "About twice a month," he said. "I wish she'd stay out."

"How about the guy with her?"

"When she comes, he shows up too—

sooner or later," the bartender added.

I went out, got into the Mercury, and drove back up the Ridge Road. When I got near Doc Valentine's neighborhood I swung off the boulevard and parked in front of *The Erie Arms*. The Packard was there, and across the street, half a block down, I spotted the agency Ford. There was nobody in it. I moved up the walk to the ornate entranceway and went inside. Don Parks was standing there with his back to me. He had his hands in his pockets and was looking at the names on the row of mail boxes.

"Hi, Boss," he said in a low voice. He didn't turn around.

"Where is she?" I asked.

A little gray man came down the stairs and went out the swinging glass doors. He was carrying a small black bag. Don Parks moved nearer to me and leaned forward to look at a name on a box. I turned away from him and lit a cigarette.

Behind me, Don Parks said: "She's upstairs. I'm trying to figure out which apartment."

I stared out the glass doors. "Get in the Ford and wait," I said. "I'll be in Apartment 2-C—Dr. M.X. Andros. If I don't come out in ten minutes, come on up. But be careful. Doc Valentine was murdered last night."

HE WHISTLED softly. Then he walked past me and the doors swished behind him. I smashed my cigarette on the tile floor and moved up the stairs. When I entered the hallway on the second floor, I unbuttoned my coat and let my left arm hang a little way out from my .38 in its shoulder clip beneath my left shoulder. Then I walked down the hall and pressed the bell beside the door of 2-C.

I waited maybe half a minute. The door stayed shut. I tried the knob. It turned easily, and the door started to swing inward. I stepped back a little. I smelled Turkish tobacco. I waited. Nothing happened. I peeked around the edge of the door into the room.

Dr. Andros' soft brown eyes looked at me. He was standing in the center of the room. The beard just beneath his smooth, olive-tinted skin was blacker than ever, and his red lips were moist. He was wearing the same dark gray suit he had worn

at Doc's house the evening before. His black Homburg lay on a table.

"Good morning, Mr. Bennett," he said in his whisper of an accent.

"Good morning, Doctor," I said. "Don't you answer your door bell?"

"I called to you to come in," he said. "I was in the bedroom. Perhaps you didn't hear me. The lock on my door is broken."

"Going out?" I asked.

"I'm just leaving for my office. I have an appointment."

"Stick around," I said, and I looked around the apartment.

As far as I could see there was a living room, a bedroom, bath, and maybe a kitchen beyond. Furnished like a harem. Silken cushions on the floor, flowered tapestries with bronze spears holding them against the walls, a five foot vase in a corner, and oversized divan covered with a red silk shawl. All the windows were closed, and the place smelled of stale coffee and sweetish Turkish tobacco.

Dr. Andros stepped to the door, quietly closed it, and turned to face me. His eyes were no longer liquid. They were as hard and as dry as a cobra's.

"Where is she?" I asked him. "I know she's here."

The smooth skin of his face darkened a little. He ran a pink tongue over his red lips. "Who, Mr. Bennett?" His voice was almost a whisper.

"Virginia Valentine."

Suddenly he laughed softly, a low liquid laugh, like water spilling over a fountain. "I haven't seen her. Why do you ask?"

I moved backwards to the door of the bedroom. I kept him in view out of the corner of one eye and glanced inside. He came slowly towards me, smiling faintly. I backed into the bedroom and looked around. Dr. Andros stood in the doorway watching me.

An unmade bed, with pink silk sheets trailing on the floor. A marble-faced dressing table with a gilt-framed mirror over it, a gilt-foiled box of cigarettes beside an ivory ash tray on a small teakwood table beside the bed. I walked around the bed and jerked open the door of a closet. Two dark gray suits, a dark gray camel's hair overcoat, two black Homburg hats on a shelf, and three pairs of black shoes.

I closed the closet door and walked around the bed. Dr. Andros stood quietly watching me. There was an open window on the far wall with a screen in it. Through the screen I could see part of a black iron fire escape railing. The screen was hooked from the inside. I thought: *If she skipped that way, Parks will see her.*

I turned back towards the door. There was something strange on the bed. Something small and half-buried in the pink sheets. I leaned over and picked it up. In the doorway, Dr. Andros stirred a little, but he made no other move. I watched him a second, and then I examined the object in my hand.

A doll. Not an ordinary doll made for babies to pat with sticky hands, but a super-deluxe doll, modeled by an artist. About a foot high, with silky, yellow hair framing its delicately molded face—a miniature face which looked familiar. I felt of the hair with my fingers. Human hair, cut from a living person's head. And the eyelashes too, skillfully curved and pasted one by one on the tiny eyelids. It was dressed in a white linen frock which could have been tailored in Paris. Tiny white sandals of soft leather, with silver buckles the size of a dime. There were two tiny pockets on the front of the dress, and stitched in blue silk on both of them were the initials, *J.V.*

I held the doll in my hand and looked across at Dr. Andros. "Yours?"

He nodded silently, his red lips tight together.

I tossed the doll on the bed. "I should think you could do better than that," I said.

He flushed. "I've had it for a long time. It—it belonged to my wife, when she was a little girl. Her name was Josephine Valeria."

"Where is your wife now?" I asked the doctor.

"Dead," he said.

"Sorry," I said.

Dr. Andros turned away. He didn't say anything.

There was a metallic scraping sound behind me, from the direction of the window. I turned suddenly, and as I turned the room rocked with gunfire. Hot whispering sounds fled past my ears. I flung myself behind the bed. The silken sheets ripped

softly above me, and bullets thudded into the base of the wall beyond. I hugged the floor, and I got my gun in my hand, but I was too scared to lift my head above the bed. And then from a new direction, from behind me, another gun barked, and I dug my fingernails into the rug. I thought wildly: *My Lord, I'm surrounded*, and I tried to wiggle under the bed, like a snake seeking the rocks, and all the while there was a concentrated hammering roar above me. And then there was silence. I lay still, with the dusty bed springs above me.

An unsteady voice from the doorway said: "Boss, Boss—are you okay?"

I SQUIRMED out from under the bed and stood up with my gun in my hand. Don Parks leaned in the doorway, his head down. His pearl-handled .32 hung limply in his right hand. A little blue smoke was still oozing from its muzzle. The collar of his soft white shirt was a soggy red, and the right lapel of his gray herring-bone jacket was stained darkly. I didn't see Dr. Andros.

"The window," Don Parks said. "Get 'em, Boss."

I jumped for the window. There were ragged holes in the wire screen where the slugs had ripped through. I unhooked the screen and leaned out over the fire escape. I saw the street below and cars parked along the curb, and from beyond my line of vision I heard a car turn into the boulevard at high speed. There were bright red drops of blood on the iron grating beneath the window. I ducked my head back into the room and moved to the bedroom doorway. I grasped Don Parks beneath his arms and helped him to the bed. He sat down heavily, his head sagging. There was sweat on his forehead, and it glistened on his white scalp beneath his short black hair.

"You winged him, Sonny," I said. "Nice work."

I heard a faint sound behind me. I whirled. Dr. Andros stood in the doorway. There was a shiny gray cast to his dark face, and he was trembling a little.

I snapped at him. "He's bleeding a lot. Do something."

He ducked out of sight. I pushed Don Parks gently down on the bed. "Take it easy, Sonny," I said. He sighed.

Dr. Andros came into the bedroom carrying a small black bag. He knelt beside the bed and his fingers moved swiftly and deftly. He wasn't trembling now, and there was an intent look on his dark face.

"Cold water," he said to me without looking up. "And a towel. In the bathroom."

I moved to a door opposite the bed and tried the knob. It was locked. I rattled the knob and pushed. It held. I looked over my shoulder at Dr. Andros kneeling beside the bed.

He was watching me. "I forgot," he said quietly. "Force it."

"Haven't you got a key?" I asked him harshly.

"It is on the inside. Force it. Quickly."

I heaved my shoulder against the door. On the second heave the lock gave away and I stumbled into the bathroom. Virginia Valentine was sitting on the floor with her back against the tub. Her yellow hair hung over her eyes, and there was a thin silver flask in her lap. Her dress was twisted up above her knees and her long, good-looking legs were stretched out before her. One stubby, high-heeled brown shoe lay on the floor beside her.

I stepped over her legs, grabbed a towel from a rack and soaked it in cold water from the tap.

As I went out the door, the girl moaned softly: "Darling . . . Darling . . . come and get me . . ."

When I re-entered the bedroom, Don Parks was sitting up. Dr. Andros took the towel from me and began to do things to the wounded man's neck. Parks grinned silently up at me, and I leaned over to see how much damage the slug had done. There was a smooth red groove at the base of his neck, just above his collar bone.

Dr. Andros said tonelessly: "The bone is not damaged. He's lost some blood, but not too much."

"How do you feel?" I asked Parks.

"Not too bad," he said. "Arm's getting stiff. Do you suppose the Doc has a drink around here?"

Dr. Andros, busy with gauze and bandages, said: "There's some fig wine in the cabinet in there." He jerked his head towards the living room.

Parks, grimaced, said: "Thanks just the same, Doc."

I went back into the bathroom. Virginia Valentine had not moved. I took the silver flask from her lap and shook it. There was a faint gurgle. I carried the flask back into the bedroom and handed it to Parks. He tilted it to his lips.

"Hmm," he said. "Scotch."

I walked back into the living room, spotted the phone on a table, and called Dr. Valentine's office. Paula Stark answered.

"This is Jim," I said.

"Good morning, Jim. How are you?" She had a pleasant voice, rich and low.

"Terrible," I said. "Listen. Have you seen the police this morning?"

There was silence on the wire for maybe ten seconds. Then she said: "The police? Why do you ask that, Jim?" It seemed to me that her voice was cool and guarded.

"Doc is dead," I said.

There was silence again.

"Paula . . ." I began.

She broke in. "Dead? When?—How?"

"Sometime last night, or early this morning." I waited a second, and then I said: "He was murdered."

"No," she said faintly. "No . . ." Her voice sounded choked, as if it were hard for her to breath.

"Keep your chin up," I said. "I've got to get back to his house. I'm at *The Erie Arms*, on the boulevard. Apartment 2-C—a Dr. Andros. I need your help. Can you come over? Now?"

"Yes, Jim," she said quietly.

"That's a good girl," I said. "One of my men is here. He's wounded. Virginia Valentine is here, too. She's drunk. I want you to take care of her—get her home as soon as possible, in as good a shape as possible. She's got a tough time ahead of her. Got it?"

"Jim," Paula said, "did she—?"

"I don't know," I said. "I hope not."

WHEN I entered the bathroom, Virginia Valentine was lying in the same position. There was a black leather purse in the tub behind her. I picked up the purse, opened it. The usual woman's junk—powder, lipstick, cigarettes, matches, wallet. I flipped open the wallet. The first thing I saw was a State of Ohio driver's license. *Virginia Agnes Valentine, 32, 5-16-1915, Female, 120, 5'4", blonde, gray,*

housewife. There was also seventy-eight dollars in bills. Nestled between the bills was a small white slip of paper. I took it out, unfolded it. Scrawled in pencil were the words: *You know where. \$500—or else. 9:30.* I put the paper in my pocket, rummaged some more, didn't find anything. I stuck the wallet back into the purse, dropped it into the bathtub.

I sighed, and looked down at the girl on the floor. She began to slowly move her head from side to side. Her eyes were closed. "Darling, Darling," she said.

Dr. Andros appeared in the doorway. His swarthy face was impassive. I wiggled a finger at him. "Talk."

His gaze dropped to Virginia Valentine, and his eyes were sad. "I've been trying to help her," he said. "She's sick—in her mind. Her husband has been so kind to me.... I—I wanted to repay him in some way, if I could. I think just talking to me has helped her. Her baby died at birth, and she can't have any more, and she brooded about it too much. She blamed herself—it became an obsession with her. We have a word for it. Dr. Valentine has been so busy....no time to help her. She needs understanding—and love...."

"And have you—helped her?" I asked.

He flushed. "I've tried, Mr. Bennett. She came to me this morning. She often does—when she's upset. She was incoherent. She babbled to me about money, and the doctor, and about a strange man's voice on the telephone. I tried to calm her. Naturally, I didn't want the doctor to know about her visits to me—it would only worry him more. I didn't want anyone to know...."

There was a silent shadow beyond the

door, and I saw Don Parks standing behind Dr. Andros. Except for the bandage around his neck, he was naked to the waist. He stood quietly, his broad, lean back against the wall.

I said to Dr. Andros: "You couldn't be just a teeny-weeny bit in love with her yourself?"

His eyes suddenly flamed, and he took a quick step towards me.

Behind him, Don Parks said: "Easy, Doc," and I saw the glint of the .32 in his hand.

Dr. Andros stood still, his fist clenched. From between his teeth, he said to me: "Dr. Valentine is my friend."

"Was," I said. "Dr. Valentine was stabbed to death last night."

A kind of a sighing scream filled the bathroom. I turned. Virginia Valentine was staring up at me. The fingers of both her hands were spread across the lower part of her face and her eyes looked as big as billiard balls.

Dr. Andros' breath was on the back of my neck. "Damn you," he said.

I turned and looked at him.

"What kind of a trick is this?" he said. "What do you want?"

"I want to know who killed Doc Valentine," I said.

The girl began to scream again. I shuddered my way past Dr. Andros. "Do something for her," I said as I passed.

I closed the bathroom door to soften the sound of her screaming. Don Parks stuck his .32 into a hip pocket and looked at me. His lean, Indian-like face was white.

"Feel O.K., Sonny?" I asked him.

He managed a grin. "I wish I had some more of that scotch."



...ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT! *

"What happened?" I asked him.

"A guy starts up the fire escape from in back. I don't see him until he's almost up to the second floor. I see him looking in the window about where I figure you are—2-C. So I run inside, thinking to tip you off. But I hear his gun just as I bust into the apartment. This guy—Andros?—is standing outside the bedroom door, scared blue. I get to the door and I see the guy slinging lead at you through the screen, and I open up on him."

"And a good thing," I said. "He had me cold. What did he look like?"

"Couldn't tell much. Big guy, with kind of a greenish tweed coat. No hat, light hair—"

"Yeah," I said.

"What?"

"Never mind, Sonny. Tell me again about last night. Around five-thirty a Buick stopped in front of Doc's house. A woman went in for maybe two minutes. A man stayed in the car. The woman came out, and they leave. Then you went in and saw Mrs. Valentine on the bed—still sleeping?"

He nodded. "That's right."

"All right," I said. "Then around three o'clock in the morning you spotted a guy in a dark suit and a Homburg hat snooping around the house. You investigate, and he fades out."

He nodded again, a little wearily. "I feel a little rocky. Let's sit down."

The screaming inside the bathroom had stopped. All we could hear was the soft murmur of Dr. Andros' voice. I walked into the living room, threw some cushions out of a chair and sat down. Don Parks stretched out on the divan. His lean torso made a perfect picture for the oriental background.

"At six o'clock I relieved you," I continued. "You left, and Doc came home around six thirty. At six forty-five I saw Dr. Andros leaving the house. I don't know how he got in. I followed him, and he came here, to his apartment. At nine o'clock Mrs. Valentine left the house. And so Doc was killed sometime between six-thirty, the time he came home, and when his wife left."

Parks sat up and looked at him. "Then it must have been Andros I saw at three o'clock—dark suit, Homburg." He smacked a fist into his palm. "He was checking to see if Doc was home yet."

"Maybe," I said. "But he took a long chance in coming back to kill him—after he knew that you had spotted him, and maybe recognized him."

Parks said: "Guys take a lot of chances—for a woman. And you saw Andros leave the house fifteen minutes after Doc came home."

"The coroner's report will help us on that," I said. "So you think Andros is in love with her?"

He shrugged his naked shoulders. "I heard what he said to you in the bathroom. He's nuts about her."

"Probably," I said. "But the cops will pin it on her."

He shook his head slowly. "It could be, but I don't think so. She was too drunk. What motive would she have? Not to live happily ever after with a jerk like Andros?"

I laughed. "Relax, Sonny."

He grinned at me, and laid back gently against the cushions on the divan. The doorbell buzzed. I got up and opened the door for Paula Stark. Her face was pale, but she was still one of the prettiest girls I had ever seen. Don Parks stood up and I saw a shadow of pain cross his face. But he smiled at the girl. I introduced him to her, and he bowed slightly. Her eyes widened a little at the sight of his naked torso. There was a little dried blood splashed across his chest. She looked a question at me.

"Mr. Parks stopped a bullet—for me," I told her.

She looked quickly at Parks, and there were tears in her eyes. "Thank you," she said simply.

Parks raised his eyebrows at me and grinned a little. I felt uncomfortable. I said to Paula: "She's in the bathroom. Dr. Andros is with her. Do what you can for her and take her home. I'll stall the police a little while."

She nodded silently. Then she said: "Jim, can you tell me—about the doctor? Who—?"

"He's—just dead," I said gently.

"How?"

"A knife. In the neck."

She put a hand over her face, and she swayed on her feet a little. Don Parks moved forward and steadied her with his good arm.

Paula Stark looked at me. "But who?" she said. "And why? He was one of the finest men...." Her chin trembled.

"Yeah, I know," I said. I nodded at Parks. "Stick around. Keep your eye on Andros until I get back. Sure you're okay?"

"Sure," he said.

I went out. As I passed the mail boxes at the bottom of the stairs, a name caught my eye. I stopped and looked closer at a little white card beneath a box marked 3-C. The name on the card was J.E. Vargo.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Nobody Can Help Me—Ever"

IT WAS eleven o'clock in the morning when I arrived at Dr. Valentine's house. The place was swarming with cops. Detective Sergeant Rockingham gave me a sermon about leaving the scene of a crime, and he wanted to know where in hell Mrs. Valentine was. I told him about my deal with Doc Valentine, and that Mrs. Valentine would show up shortly.

He chewed on his red mustache. "It's too bad about her, Jim. Doc was all right, and we covered up for her many a time—because of him. She killed him, of course. Doc carried a hundred grand insurance policy, and she's the beneficiary. We found that much out already, and we ain't even started. She traveled fast, and there'll be a boy friend in the woodpile. We'll find him—"

"She didn't kill him," I broke in. "She was too drunk." I told him all about what had happened the night before. "You might have something in the boy-friend angle," I finished.

"This Dr. Andros," he said. "We want him. The coroner says that Doc was killed between five and seven o'clock—that's as close as he can place it right now. He'll narrow it down later. You saw Andros leaving here at six forty-five—fifteen minutes after you saw Doc come home. Let's go."

I went outside with him, and we got into a squad car with two cops. As we pulled away from the house, I saw Paula Stark and Virginia Valentine get out of a taxi. The doctor's wife seemed to be walking

straight enough, and I figured that Paula had done a good job of sobering her up. I hated to toss her to Rockingham, but there wasn't much else I could do.

Rockingham saw her too. "She'll keep," he said grimly. "Andros is my boy."

We found Don Parks and Dr. Andros sitting quietly in the living room of Andros' apartment. But when Andros saw the policemen, he jumped to his feet.

"Sorry, Doctor," I said.

His face was kind of a yellow color now, and his lips were moist and red. "Why?" he said.

"Because you were seen leaving Dr. Valentine's house early this morning," I said.

"What time, Mr. Bennett?" he asked.

"Six forty-five."

"Mr. Bennett," he said quietly, "I was at a patient's house on the east side at six forty-five this morning."

"Doctor," I said, "I personally followed you here to this apartment at that time this morning."

He made a hopeless gesture with his hands. I nodded silently to Rockingham. Dr. Andros picked up his hat, and they left the room. At the doorway, Rockingham said over his shoulder: "See me later, Jim."

I waited while Don Parks put his coat on over his naked shoulders. He buttoned it up around his neck, and we went down the stairs to the apartment house entrance-way.

"Sonny," I said to him, "I won't forget what you did for me up there."

He grinned at me, and lifted his big shoulders. "It isn't the first time I've had a look at my hole card, Boss," he said.

"You got a girl?" I asked.

He lit a cigarette. "I might scare one up," he said, blowing out his match.

"Scare her up," I said. "Get drunk. Relax. I'll see you tomorrow."

He blew smoke at the ceiling. "Thanks, Boss. What's the catch?"

"Fifteen minutes more work. Okay?"

"Sure."

I nodded at the mail box with Jed Vargo's name beneath it. "He lives in the apartment next to Dr. Andros. I'll send Alec Hammond out right away. Stick around until he gets here. I don't think Vargo will show up right away—but he

might. He's a big guy, about your height, but heavier. Blond hair, blue eyes."

"And wearing a green tweed coat?" Parks asked.

"Probably," I said. "If he hasn't changed it."

"It'll be a pleasure," he said.

"I'll take the Ford," I told him. "After Hammond comes, the first thing you better do is have a doctor check that neck."

"And not scare up a babe and get drunk?" He smiled at me.

"That's the second thing you do. I've got a little job down in Elyria which will probably take me until sometime tonight. I'll call Hammond on my way out of town. Okay?"

"Roger," he said.

* * *

IT TOOK me longer than I had expected to get the Elyria steel magnate's red-headed secretary out of his hair—and pocket-book. I also hadn't expected the bonus he gave me, or the party he threw to celebrate. I left for Cleveland around eight-thirty, feeling a little mellow from many Scotch and sodas and more than a little pleased with myself.

Forty minutes later I stopped for a light at one of the crossroads on Route 20 just inside the outskirts of Rocky River. A blue 1941 coupe edged out of the crossroad with the green light and turned over into the lane next to mine. It was coming slow, too slow, and it was in the wrong lane. At first I thought the driver was drunk, and I laid on my horn to scare him off. But he came right at me, and then he leveled out. There wasn't any other traffic at that moment, and I figured if the coupe kept on its course it would pass me with maybe a foot to spare. But suddenly I had an uneasy feeling.

At the last second before the blue coupe came abreast of me I gunned the Ford and swung the wheel to the right. The Ford jumped like a greyhound, and in the same instant a gun barked behind my ear and the windshield splintered in front of my eyes. I fed gas and circled in a wide arc, the wheels screaming on the rims. The blue coupe zoomed away, headed west, and I barreled the Ford after it.

At the next intersection we hit a batch

of cars waiting for the green. Traffic with a few holes in it was streaming across the road. The coupe swung out into the left lane, picked a hole, and wheeled through against the light. But when I hit the red light, there weren't any holes to squeeze through. I slammed on the brakes just short of the solid line of cross traffic, gunned the Ford and edged the light. When I got loose on the amber, the coupe was long gone.

I turned at the next cross road and circled back into Rocky River.

IT WAS a little after ten o'clock when I parked the Ford in front of *The Erie Arms*. Alec Hammond, carrying a newspaper, strolled down the sidewalk towards me. When I got out of the Ford, he stopped and nodded at the splintered windshield.

"Trouble, Jim?"

"Yeah," I said. "Somebody tried to gun me out on 20. He got away."

Alec made *tsk, tsk* noises with his lips. He was a tall thin man, with a pleasant, freckled face and red hair.

"Vargo come back?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Just now. He just went up. I sneaked up the stairs behind him. He went into 3-C. There was a woman with him."

"All right," I said. "Stay out here. Watch the fire escape. I'm going up."

Alec looked worried. "I better go along, Jim."

"No," I said. "Stay here."

He lifted his lean shoulders. "I better, Jim."

"Watch the door and the fire escape," I said. "If you hear a ruckus, come a-running."

I went inside and up the stairs. I moved down the hall, passed Dr. Andros' apartment, and stopped in front of 3-C. There was a light shining under the door, and I heard the muted melody of a radio. I pressed the bell.

The radio stopped, and the light went out. I heard a woman's voice, but I couldn't make out the words. I pressed the bell again, and I stepped clear of the door. I crossed my right arm over my chest, grasped the smooth butt of my .38 in its clip beneath my left arm, and I waited. The woman inside stopped talking, and for

maybe half a minute I didn't hear anything. Then the lock clicked on the inside, and the door swung open. I looked into the dark apartment. The light from the hall showed me a tan rug and the end of a dark green divan.

"Vargo," I said.

There was the sound of quick footsteps inside, and a chair thudded to the carpet.

Jed Vargo's voice said: "Paula, damn you...."

The lights came on. My .38 and I jumped into the apartment and looked around. Paula Stark stood by the opposite wall, her finger still on the light switch. Jed Vargo was across the room, behind an over-stuffed green chair. His thick yellow hair glinted in the light. His blue eyes looked almost black.

I looked at the girl. "Honey, I hate to let you in for this."

She didn't say anything. Her face was white, and her eyes looked big and dark. "What do you want, Jim?" she said.

I jerked my head at Vargo. "Him. He tried to kill me today."

She shot a quick glance at Vargo, and she moved away from the wall, towards me.

"What are you talking about, Bennett?" Vargo's voice was ragged. A lock of yellow hair fell over his forehead, and sweat glistened on his handsome face.

My gun felt good in my hand. I said to Vargo: "You've been black-mailing Virginia Valentine. You live next door to Dr. Andros, and you knew that she was coming here to see him at all hours of the day and night. You figured that Doc Valentine wouldn't like that, and his wife figured the same thing. You didn't have any trouble convincing her that it would be to her advantage to pay you to keep her visits to Dr. Andros a secret from her husband. And so she paid. Five hundred this morning at *The Ranch House*, for example. When you saw me there this morning, you figured that maybe Doc Valentine had hired me to get on your trail. You got scared, and so you followed me. You went up the fire escape and tried to shoot me through the window of Dr. Andros' bedroom. But one of my men was watching from outside, and he stopped that. I saw blood on the fire escape—where did he get you?"

There was silence in the room. And then Paula Stark said in an uncertain

voice: "Jim, you're mistaken. Jed wouldn't—"

"Sure he would," I broke in. "It's time you found it out. He's been giving you a play so that he could keep better track of Virginia Valentine and Doc—through you. And since you were so close to Doc, he figured being engaged to you would throw suspicion off him in case Doc got to checking on his wife's expenses—he would never suspect his efficient little nurse's fiance, would he?"

Vargo said contemptuously: "It's silly. You can't prove a word of it."

I said: "I've got the note you wrote to Virginia Valentine telling her to meet you at nine-thirty this morning at *The Ranch House* with five hundred bucks."

He smiled a little, and he slowly lifted his right arm from behind the chair. His fingers gripped the back of the chair. There was a bandage around his wrist.

Paula Stark turned away and covered her face with her hands. She didn't make any noise, but her slender shoulders began to tremble a little.

But I was watching Vargo. He stopped smiling, and his left arm whipped up. There was a big black automatic in it, and he squeezed the trigger as his hand cleared the back of the chair. I jumped away as his gun let loose. I pumped two quick shots at him. He slumped over the chair.

Paula Stark let go with a scream. I jumped to the chair and scooped up Vargo's gun. He stumbled blindly around the chair, groped with his left hand, and slumped down. My slugs had caught him where I had wanted them to—in his left shoulder. He was as immobilized as a fly in a matchbox. He looked at me silently with eyes brimming with pain and hate. The air in the room was bitter with gun smoke.

THREE was a commotion in the hall outside, and somebody banged on the door. The door opened then, and Alec Hammond jumped inside. He had a short-nosed .32 in his hand, and his green eyes glittered. He slammed the door shut behind him, and he stood with his back against it. His eyes swept the room. The pounding started on the door again.

"You all right, Jim?"

"Sure," I said. "Keep the mob out. I'll

call the cops and give them the story."

He gave me a lop-sided grin and replaced his gun in its shoulder holster. He went out, slamming the door behind him. I heard his voice in the hall, and the babble of sound subsided. I moved across the room to the telephone and called the cops. When I turned around, Paula Stark was watching me. I went over to her. There was fear and bewilderment in her eyes.

"Take it easy," I said to her. "Better guys than him are a nickel a carload. How long have you been with him tonight?"

She swayed a little and shot a glance at the man in the chair. "I better look after Jed...."

From across the room, Vargo said nastily: "Don't mind me, Darling. I'm just bleeding to death."

She looked directly at me then. "Not long, Jim. He picked me up at the office a little while ago and brought me here. He said he wanted to talk to me."

"What kind of car was he driving?"

She frowned slightly, "Why, his Buick.

"Did he drive you to Dr. Valentine's house this morning around five-thirty?"

"Yes, Jim. I was trying to find the doctor. The hospital wanted him. I went in, but the doctor wasn't there...."

"All right," I said. I jerked my head at Vargo. "Fix him up."

She turned silently and left the room.

I said to Vargo: "You won't collect from Virginia Valentine anymore. Doc is dead."

He was fighting pain. Frm between his teeth he said: "What kind of a gag is that?"

"No gag. The cops will pin it on his wife—unless somebody spills something."

"I'm heartbroken," he said.

"She's the goose that laid the golden eggs," I said softly.

"To hell with you," he said.

The door opened, and Alec Hammond came in, followed by a couple of cops. I knew one of them, and I gave him the story. Paula Stark came into the room with towels and a pan of water. While she fussed with Vargo, I talked fast, and the cops finally left to take Vargo to the hospital. Alec and Paula and I went down to the street and got into the agency Ford.

I dropped Alec at his south-side room, and after that I took Paula home.

I stopped the Ford in front of her house and shut off the motor. She sat huddled in the far corner of the seat. I offered her a cigarette, but she shook her head silently. I lit one for myself. "You've had a bad night," I said.

"Don't talk about it," she said.

"Doc was a friend of mine," I said gently.

She sat up straight and I felt her eyes on me in the darkness. "What do you think he was to me? He was the finest, the kindest man who ever lived...."

I squirmed in my seat and flicked ashes out the window. "Yeah, I know," I said. "Want to go out and see his wife?"

There was silence in the car for a couple of seconds. Then she said bitterly: "That—woman? No!"

I put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to me. "Feel bad about Vargo?" I asked.

She stirred restlessly under my arm. "Not as long as you're here, Jim. I—guess I never really liked him. There was something about him—a look in his eyes...."

I snapped my cigarette out the window and I put both arms around her. She raised her face to me and I kissed her. She smelled nice, and her lips were warm and soft. I felt her fingernails digging into the back of my neck.

"Ever since that first night, Jim," she murmured, "when you staggered into the office. You looked so big and so terrifying, and you were holding a bloody hand to your side....I guess—I've loved you ever since...."

"How about lunch tomorrow?" I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

She drew away from me a little and drew her coat around her. "All right, Jim," she said lightly. "Where?"

"I'll pick you up at the office," I said. "Around twelve. Or won't you be going to the office any more?"

"I don't know. For a couple of days, I suppose. Until things are settled."

I got out of the Ford and went around and opened the door for her. I walked with her up to the steps of her house. At the door she turned.

"Thank you, Jim," she said.

"For what?"

"For—everything." Her lips were red in the shadows, and her eyes were big and black.

I leaned towards her, and she slid her arms around my neck. I kissed her. She murmured against my cheek: "Tomorrow, Jim."

"Twelve o'clock," I said, and I left her.

I got into the Ford and drove out to Doc Valentine's house. There were lights inside. I parked and went up to the front door and pressed the bell.

It was ten minutes until midnight.

SERGEANT Rockingham had left. A plainclothes-man I knew named Horgan was on duty. He told me that they hadn't arrested Virginia Valentine yet, and that he was waiting for orders from Rockingham. He said that the doctor's wife was in her room.

"What's Rock waiting for?" I asked.

Horgan shrugged. He was a medium-sized, middle-aged man with a round, smooth face and gold-rimmed glasses. A gold lodge emblem was draped across the vest of his blue serge suit. "I don't know. It's my guess that she wasn't as drunk as she was supposed to be. Women have killed their husbands for a hell of a lot less than a hundred grand insurance pay-off. The knife she used came from a drawer in the kitchen—part of a carving set."

"Anybody with her now?" I asked.

"That good-looking nurse of Doc's was with her all afternoon. She left early this evening. After that, Maggie Donovan took over. She's with her now."

Maggie Donovan was a beefy police-woman with a tough exterior and a mother-to-all-the-world heart.

"Okay if I talk to her—the wife, I mean?" I said. "I was working for Doc when he got it."

Horgan gave me a twisted grin. "Body-guard? You're slipping, ain't you, Jim?"

"Not Doc," I said. "His wife."

Horgan's chuckle followed me as I moved down the hall.

The door to Doc's room was closed, but there was light spilling from under the door of the room next to it. I knocked softly, the lock clicked on the inside and Maggie Donovan's huge bulk blotted out the light.

"Hello, Maggie. Can I come in?"

She had gray hair combed severely back from a round, red face. "Hello, Jim. What do you want?"

"I want to see Mrs. Valentine. I was on a job for Doc before—"

She nodded and stepped aside. "Make it quick, Jim," she said to me in a very low voice.

I moved over to the bed. Virginia Valentine lay against a pile of pillows with a satin quilt over her knees. She was wearing black silk pajamas with long sleeves and a collar which buttoned tight around her neck. Her face was about the color of clean white paper, and her yellow hair fell in pale waves around her face and shoulders. Her eyes were closed, and the shaded light beside the bed glinted on long lashes the color of wet sand. The blue half-moons beneath her eyes were darker now, and her lips were bloodless. I thought that she had once been a beautiful woman—still was, for that matter—and I remembered what Doc had told me about her, about the early, tough days. I tried to picture her as she had been fourteen years ago; cheerfully serving as nurse, secretary and wife to a struggling young doctor who worked around the clock.

Behind me, Maggie Donovan whispered: "I gave her a hypo a couple of hours ago. It should be worn off by now."

I nodded and said softly to the girl on the bed: "Mrs. Valentine."

She didn't move.

"Virginia," I said.

Her lashes flickered a little then, and her lips moved. "Darling, Darling, come and get me," she whispered.

I touched her arm. She opened her eyes and looked at me. Then she said very distinctly. "I know you. Your name's Bennett—a friend of John's."

"That's right," I said. "I'd like to help. Can you answer a couple of questions?"

She moved her slim shoulders slightly. "Why not?" Her mouth twisted a little.

"Do you have a doll?" I asked. "A special little doll, which looks like you? With the initials 'J.V.' on its dress?"

She turned her face away from me and stared at the wall. A tear slid down her cheek. "That's Jeanette," she said softly. "My little girl. I know she would have liked me—if she had lived...."

"I saw it in Dr. Andros' apartment."

She nodded slightly. "He's a kind man. He—he loves me. He's been trying to help me. But nobody can help me... ever."

I took a deep breath. "Did you kill your husband?"

There was silence in the room for maybe half a minute. Then she said: "I don't know. I—don't—know."

I leaned over the bed. "Why don't you know?"

She turned her face towards me, and her mouth twisted. "Because I was drunk, Mr. Bennett. Dead drunk."

"Did you want to kill him—before, I mean?"

She turned away again. "Get out of here," she said in an ugly voice. "Get out of here, quickly, quickly." She began to sob.

Maggie Donovan jerked her head towards the door. As I went out, I heard her say to the woman on the bed: "Now, now, Honey, you just take it easy."

WHEN I entered the living room, Horgan was sitting in the white leather chair by the fireplace. He grinned at me. "All sewed up, Jim?"

"Sure, sure," I said wearily and sat down in a chair opposite him. "Is Rock still holding this Dr. Andros?"

"No. He let him loose. Some guy out on the east side swore that Andros was tending his wife at the time you said you saw Andros leaving here."

"Who?" I asked.

He took a small ten-cent note book from an inside pocket and thumbed the pages with blunt fingers. He flipped a page and held it to the light. "What would you private dicks do without us cops?" he said. He read from the page: "Alfred L. Newcomb, 1546 Hanna Street."

"Thanks," I said. I stood up.

"Oh, by the way," Horgan said. "While you was in there, a guy came to the door and asked for you. Said he'd wait outside."

"Who is he?"

"He didn't say. Big guy, young. Had a bandage on his neck."

"Thanks," I said. I went out.

The agency's number two Ford was at the curb. Don Parks was standing beside it. He was holding a handkerchief to his left cheek.

"You're supposed to be relaxing, Sonny," I said to him. "What's the matter with your face?"

"I got nicked with a chunk of flying glass," he said. He reached into the Ford and turned on the dome light. This car was the twin of the one I had been driving—same year, model and color. The glass in the left window beside the driver's seat was shattered, and there were some small chunks of glass in the floor.

Parks said: "I didn't take your advice about a girl and a few drinks. Guess I wasn't in the mood. I hung around the hotel and slowly went nuts. Then I got the other Ford out of the garage and started out here. I figured maybe I'd find you here, and I wanted to see how you were making out. But down on the boulevard somebody in a blue '41 coupe crowded me at a light and slung some lead at me. His aim was bad, but he broke the window."

"That makes two of us," I said.

He looked a question at me.

"The same thing happened to me out on Route 20 tonight," I said. "By a guy in a '41 coupe. Who drives that kind of a car?"

He whistled softly and dabbed at his cut cheek. "I didn't catch the license. But he must have been after you—both times. I was driving the same kind of a car, and after he missed you out on the highway he must have tailed you and tried it again."

"Could be," I said. "That's the second time today you were the target for bullets intended for me. I'll have to recommend you for combat pay."

He grinned and nodded towards the house. "How they making out in there?"

"They'll pin it on Mrs. Valentine."

He shook his head slowly. "She may not be a Sunday school teacher, but she's getting a raw deal. You said you saw this Dr. Andros leaving the house right after Dr. Valentine came home—"

"The cops say that Andros has an alibi," I quickly broke in. "They aren't holding him."

"Hmmm," he said. "What kind of an alibi?"

I told him. "Think we ought to check it?"

He put his handkerchief in his pocket. The cut on his cheek had stopped bleeding. "You're the boss," he said. "How do we stand on this deal now?"

"We're out in the cold," I said. "Doc hired us to keep track of his wife. We did that. But Doc's dead."

"Nothing in it for the agency any more?"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not. I could put in a claim against the estate, but that's always a mess."

"Wasn't Dr. Valentine a good friend of yours?" he asked.

I nodded grimly. I was thinking about the picture in my mind of Doc on the bed with the knife in his neck.

"What's money, Boss?" Parks said, grinning. "Let's go. I can't sleep anyhow."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Mail Must Go Through. . . .

WE LEFT my Ford with its shattered windshield parked at the curb, and I got behind the wheel of the car Don Parks had driven. He slid in beside me and we headed for the east side. The September night had turned cool, and the air streaming through the broken window felt good on my face.

Number 1546 Hanna Street was a small frame house with a narrow porch and a garage in back. The lake was a block away. As I shut off the Ford's motor, I heard the hoot of an ore boat coming up the channel.

Don Parks waited in the car, and I went up to the porch. There was a fancy wooden plaque tacked beside the door which said: *The Newcombs*. There was a light inside

the house and a radio was blasting out with a twanging hill-billy song. I pressed the bell.

The door opened immediately and a little man stood looking at me. He was about thirty-five, with a narrow pale face and a butter-bowl haircut. He had on a blue work shirt, blue overall pants and gray felt house slippers. With the door open, the sound of the radio made my ears jump.

"Mr. Newcomb?" I shouted.

He nodded and peered past me at the Ford at the curb.

I yelled at him: "Who's your doctor?"

He screwed up his face and said something. From the way his lips moved, I guessed it was: "What?" Then he jerked his head at me and entered the house. I followed him. It was a small house, meagerly and cheaply furnished. But the handsome de luxe cabinet radio in a corner was certainly the best—and the loudest—that money could buy. The little man crossed the room and turned it down to approximately the volume of a symphony orchestra in the Hollywood bowl. My ears quivered, but they stopped jumping.

In the comparative quiet, the little man said: "The missus likes it loud. She's upstairs in bed. What was it you asked me?"

"Your wife sick?" I asked him.

He took a half-smoked cigarette out of his shirt pocket and stuck it in his mouth. "Yeah," he said. "She's sick. Gall bladder trouble. I had a hell of a time with her last night."

"Who's your doctor?" I asked.

"Why?" he said, reasonably. "You a cop? They was here once today."

"Yes," I said. "I'm a cop. I won't take long. Who's your wife's doctor?"

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AND TUNE IN: TWO NETWORK SHOWS! "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sunday evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Sat. afternoons, NBC Network.

"Doc Andros," he said. "I told them other cops. What'd he do—murder somebody?" He laughed loudly.

"Just a routine check-up," I said. "Did he come to see your wife early this morning?"

"Yeah," he said. "He got here around five-thirty and stayed until around seven-thirty. I laid off work today."

"How long has he been treating your wife?" I asked him.

"About a year. The missus has always got something wrong with her."

I said. "Too bad. Kind of tough on your pay check, isn't it?"

"Tough?" he said. "It's murder. I owe Doc Andros over three hundred bucks right now, and the finance company is gonna take the radio...."

From upstairs a woman's voice yelled: "Al! Turn up the radio!"

The little man walked across the room and viciously twisted a dial. The walls began to shake and my ears started jumping again.

"What kind of a car does Doc drive?" I shouted at him.

He turned and cupped a hand to his ear.

I repeated my question.

He cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted: "A '41 coupe!"

I nodded at him and moved to the door. He said something to me—at least I saw his lips move—and I smiled and shook my head and went out.

When I got behind the wheel of the Ford, I saw that Don Parks had his pearl-handled .32 in his hand.

"What's up," I asked him.

"A car just went past slow," he said. "A '41 coupe."

"Which way?" I asked.

"Towards the lake," he said.

"Keep your eye peeled," I said, and I swung the Ford in a U-turn. "We'll go to my place. Can you use a drink?"

"I sure could, Boss," he said, and he laughed.

I wheeled the Ford right on an amber light and headed for Euclid Avenue. "This sticks assignment a little too rugged for you?" I asked him.

"We had it rough in the east too, sometimes," he said. "What did you find out back there?"

"Doc's alibi holds water," I said. "Unless he's got this Newcomb bought off. The dope admitted that he owes Andros over three hundred dollars. Andros could use that as a persuader—to make Newcomb say that he was there this morning looking after his sick wife."

"Did you see his wife?" Parks asked. "And was she sick?"

"I heard her," I said. "And she could act sick enough to fool me."

"That damn coupe," he said. "First he jumps you in Rocky River, then me on the boulevard, and then just now. He's hot on your tail, boss."

"We'll shake him," I said, and I swung into the alley behind the apartment house where I lived. I parked the Ford and we went up the back entrance.

* * *

It was exactly one o'clock when I switched on the lights in my apartment. Don Parks sank into the easy chair by my book shelves, leaned back his head and closed his eyes. His face looked thin and pale in the shaded light, and a thin dark stubble of beard showed on his cheeks and firm chin.

"Scotch or bourbon, soda or water?" I asked him.

"Bourbon, Boss," he said without opening his eyes. "Water."

I went into the kitchen, poured him a stiff drink, added water from the tap. I made myself a bourbon and soda and carried the drinks into the living room. When I handed Parks his drink, he opened his eyes, said: "Thanks, Boss. That ought to help."

The telephone rang. When I picked it up, a woman's voice said: "Jim?"

It was Paula Stark.

"Aren't you in bed yet?" I asked her.

"I couldn't sleep, Jim. I thought I'd call and see if you'd found out anything. I've been thinking again about Agnes, and—"

"Who's Agnes?" I broke in.

"Virginia—Mrs. Valentine. Her middle name is Agnes—I always called her that. I was with her all afternoon—I guess I forgot to tell you."

"You said you were at the office when Vargo picked you up," I said.

"I was, Jim. I went there after I left the doctor's house. . . ."

Her voice went on and on, but I didn't hear her. It suddenly seemed that a cold wind was blowing through the room. I shivered a little and hung tight to the telephone. Things began tumbling over in my mind. Remembered happenings, snatches of conversation paraded across my brain in pitiless clarity.

"And I've cancelled all of the doctor's appointments," Paula was saying. "Jim, are you listening?"

"Sure," I said, and I felt a hundred and ten years old.

"Do you think I should close the office?"

"Sure," I said again, and it seemed as though a stranger was standing there at the telephone saying mechanical things for me without a thought to their meaning. "Lock it up. Doc won't need it any more."

"Jim?"

"Yeah."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Look," I said gently. "Are you at home?"

"Of course, Jim. But—"

"Stay there," I said softly, and I slowly replaced the phone in its cradle.

I sighed deeply and took a long swallow of my drink. Don Parks sat with his glass in his hand, his eyes closed. I picked up my hat and said to him: "Want to take a ride?"

He groaned and opened his eyes. "You mean now, Boss?"

"I'm afraid so," I said.

He sat up straight and took a long swallow of his drink. "Neither rain nor storm nor snow nor sleet. . . ." he said.

"That's right," I said wearily. "The mail must go through." I didn't like the job I had ahead of me.

Parks drained his glass. "Trouble, Boss? Where we going?"

"To the police," I said. "To turn in Doc Valentine's murderer."

He started to get out of his chair. "Andros?" he asked.

I shook my head slowly. "No, Sonny. Not Dr. Andros. You."

HE LOOKED up at me and he smiled, but there was despair and fear in his eyes. Then he said in a tight voice: "I was

afraid of this, Boss. Where did I slip up?"

"A couple of places," I said, watching him. "When I came to take your place at six o'clock this morning, you had already killed Doc Valentine. The knife was silent, and you didn't want any noise which might wake his wife. Doc came home sometime during the night while you were on duty. You slipped in the house, killed him, drove his Packard a couple of blocks away, parked it, came back got in the Ford and waited for me.

"After I came, you drove away, fooled around a little to kill time, then got in Doc's Packard and drove it home. You knew that I would recognize the car, but that it would be too dark to identify the driver, and you figured that I would assume that it was Doc. Well, I did.

"You killed him because you are in love with his wife, have been since you met her in Columbus during your college days. You kept in touch with her, and you knew about Doc's big insurance policy. That's why you asked to be transferred here—to be near her, and maybe work something out. Maybe she goes for you, and maybe she doesn't. I don't know about that. But I don't think that you wanted her to know that you killed Doc—it wouldn't make any difference as long as she had the insurance money and Doc was out of the way. You figured that you could talk her into going away with you afterwards.

"Sonny, you were crazy about her—you even called your gun 'Agnes' after her middle name, and you had the nerve to tell me that it was named after a girl you knew in Columbus. That girl was Virginia Valentine, but I didn't tumble to it, not even after I saw her middle name on her driver's license. It was quite a break for you when this job fell into your lap—it was too good a chance to pass up. Am I boring you?"

"Not at all, Boss," he said. "It's fascinating. Please continue."

"To hell with it," I said. "Give me your gun."

He patted his left arm pit. "No, no, Boss. Not Agnes. She's my sweetheart. And you haven't told me yet where I really slipped. When I made the break about the name of my gun, I hadn't really decided to do it yet. So you can't count that against me."

"All right," I said. "We've got plenty

of time. Here's the rest of it. If Doc was killed, you knew that his wife would be the logical suspect. So you had to cook up something to clear her. She had told you about Dr. Andros' interest in her, and so you decided to try and pin it on him. So you go to Andros' apartment earlier in the evening and jimmy the lock on his door so that you can open it later. You borrow one of his suits and a hat—Andros' suits and hats are all alike, and you're about his size—and you took one of his Turkish cigarettes so that you'd even *smell* like him.

"Then you give me a story about a man answering Dr. Andros' description snooping around Doc's house at three o'clock this morning. After you leave me, you put on the suit and hat, drive Doc's Packard home from where you had parked it, wait a little while, and then leave the house so that I will be sure to see you. I follow you, as you expected me to, and you lead me straight to Dr. Andros' apartment and pretend to unlock the door with a key—only you had already broken the lock and it would have opened without a key.

"You carefully kept your face turned away from me, and that cigarette smoke idea was clever—it fooled me. You were good, and I would have sworn in court that I had followed Dr. Andros home. And the motive of jealousy was perfect."

There was a faint sneer on Parks' face. "Marvelous," he said. "But you still haven't told me where I slipped up."

"How about that gun now?" I said.

"No," he said.

The only light in the room was beside the book shelves. It was a floor lamp, with a heavy bronze base. I was standing beside it. I slowly shook my head and said to Parks: "Don't try anything, Sonny. I'm an old hand at this stuff."

"I know," he said. "The big boss in New York told me you were tough. But I'll take my chances. Tell me the rest of it."

I edged closer to the lamp. "I didn't tumble to any of it—until tonight," I said. "You did a good job in chasing away Vargo when he tried to gun me through Andros' bedroom window. I want to thank you for that. Thanks, Sonny."

He waved his left hand airily. "That's all right, Boss. Any time."

"But a man will do almost anything for a woman, or for money," I went on. "And

that little gesture put you in solid with me, as you hoped it would. Especially since Vargo nicked you. But you overplayed your hand. You knew that I was going to Elyria today, and you laid for me on the Elyria road tonight, on Route 20. You got scared somewhere along the line, and you figured that maybe after all, to make it fool proof, the safest thing would be to put me out of the way. But you missed me. What was it that scared you into trying to gun me?"

Parks said: "When you questioned me today about Dr. Andros, and when you asked me if I had a girl. I got scared then." He laughed shortly. "How does the saying go—'the guilty die a thousand deaths?'" He twisted a little in his chair, and the fingers of his right hand began to slowly open and close. "I went to a lot of trouble to put that shooting over," he said. "I even rented a '41 coupe, the kind of a car I knew that Dr. Andros drove—just in case anything went wrong. Plenty went wrong, but I still don't see how you connected it to me."

"That bloody cheek act of yours looked good," I said. "An out and out repeat performance, with you mistaken for me, by a killer after me. But you made the mistake of mentioning a little while ago the exact spot where the shooting occurred—in Rocky River—when all I told you was that it was on Route 20. And Route 20 runs clear to California. But I didn't tumble to it until Paula Stark called me tonight and mentioned, 'Agnes.' What'd you do—put a bullet through the window of the Ford and then bravely cut yourself with a piece of glass?"

He nodded slowly, and watched me with bright eyes.

"And that story of yours about a blue coupe tailing us tonight. You sure tried hard to put Dr. Andros in the chair. I guess I'm getting old—and dumb. But you were pretty convincing."

"Sure, Boss," he said. "I tried to throw you off my trail. Why not? I can only burn once. But I can still get my hands on that hundred grand—you and I can pin it on Andros, easy. How about talking over a deal?"

That made it easier for me. I didn't mind at all what I was going to have to do.

(Please continue on page 98)

BURN IN TURN



"Judd," she whispered,
"tell me you'll help me!"

By
**TALMAGE
POWELL**

Charlene was fire in a man's blood—in my blood. I'd once been a good private dick, and now she called on me—with terror crawling in her guts. With her soft arms around me, she promised—well, I'll tell you about Charlene. . . .

NOW I am moving down the long, long corridor, nearing the doorway beyond which she stands—waiting for me. I am seeing the richness of the corridor, feeling the quiet elegance of it sinking into me: the long walnut table with the vase of flowers; the fine beveled mirror near the elevator. A man passes me and looks at me strangely. At my clothes,

which do not belong in this apartment house. At my rough, ugly face. It is a very fine apartment building. The Delmont Arms.

For a moment I cannot move, standing before her door. I think of her and hate her. I hate her until I am cold in the guts, and still a ripple runs through my pulse knowing that she is there in the apartment—so close to me.

She answers my knock. The terror is in her face. I have seen many faces like that. Faces not as beautiful as hers, perhaps, but faces wearing the cold terror as her face is wearing it now. Her face is like her voice had been over the phone, drawn and scared, as if she will whimper at any moment. So I know that whatever has happened is close to her. She never has feeling when another is the victim. I have seen her at prizefights, laughing at the blood, sneering at the loser. She loves prizefights. But now something has happened very close to her, and she is filled with a terror that makes her sick, deep down. It is there in her face.

She clutches me when she draws me into the apartment and closes the door. She locks her arms about me and does nothing for a moment except hang on to me, whimpering: "Judd! Oh, Judd—I knew you'd come!"

Her face, with its high cheekbones, its exotic dark eyes, is buried against my chest. Her hair, blacker than black and tumbling loose about her quivering shoulders, is just below my chin; and for a moment I feel the old weakness wash over me. I feel the closeness of her and I fight the stifling pounding of my heart. Yet I am seeing the vast, sweeping living room, the couches piled with pillows, the huge fireplace, the sunken dining room on beyond, and I think of my clothes and the way the man looked at me who passed in the corridor. And I think of what had been between her and me. And somehow I think of the guys in the old Greek myth who passed the island of Circe and the sirens, and how the guys were turned into pigs.

She feels the change come over me and steps back. She looks at me with those eyes that hold a thousand shadows, a million meanings—turned on and off at her will.

"So I came," I say. "What is it you want?"

"Oh, Judd, Judd!" She packs it with meaning. A few months ago I lived for her voice to sound like that, speaking my name. But now?

"Just tell me," I say harshly, "what is it you wanted?"

She becomes very tiny then. She shrinks, and sobs begin bubbling out of her. She hasn't moved, yet she is groveling before me, so tiny and hurt. "It's Marlowe, Judd."

Marlowe Magentra, her husband.

"He's dead, Judd."

"Where?"

"In his study. Judd, you've got to get me out of this! I wasn't here, I was away, I wouldn't murder, but they'll say . . ."

"Don't run your sentences together," I say. "Let's go into the study."

The study. A semi-circular room with the huge curve of windows looking down on the city twenty stories below. A place where Marlowe Magentra could stand, eyes half-veiled, sneering at the ants toiling their miserable way through the streets, twenty stories down.

Marlowe Magentra is lying near the large walnut desk. He is a huge mound of dead blubber, and death has darkened his oily face. He has been shot in the left temple, his blood has stained the rich carpet, but even death has failed to wipe out of his veiled eyes the cynicism, the lust to toy with lives.

Charlene is shuddering on her sobs now. I hear her whimpering, "Don't let him get me, Judd! Don't let him get me."

"He can't bother you," I say. "He's dead."

"Yes, yes, I know! Marlowe's dead, But he'll crush me, Judd! All his life he crushed people, played cat and mice with people. Because of me, Judd. And now in death, he'll get me!"

The way he had got me, I think. Yes, I know Marlowe Magentra. I know everything Magentra is—was. I was a private detective, and a good one, until I met her—until Charlene crossed my path. I was a strange man, she said, a big bruiser who reads poetry and works as a private detective. Now, standing in Magentra's study, I remember the way she always shivered when she called me a big, ugly bruiser. I can see now that I was a thrill to her. Nothing more. But to me she was—well,

I touched flame and I found the flame cold.

It was like that, between her and me, for a while—those months ago. Then I found strange things happening to my agency. Accounts melted away. My creditors put the squeeze on me, and finally my license was revoked for roughing up a petty crook I was taking in, who might have killed me if I hadn't roughed him up. I knew then that he was against me; Marlowe Magentra, her husband. Magentra, the hungry chimera. A man drunk with power, laughing at the ugly bruiser he was ruining.

NOw, looking down on him in his study. I understand Marlowe Magentra—if any man can be understood. Knowing he had her, that the dark Charlene could never escape him—knowing, too, that her game of men, her lust for thrills were as much a part of her as the breath that sighed languorously in and out of her body—Magentra had had to make himself bigger, master of all those men. He had to crush them, ruin them, until they were dregs in the gutter who no longer thrilled her. Until she came crawling back to him.

"Judd!" A hoarse whisper now. Her hands like claws on my arm. "You see, don't you, Judd? You understand what they'll do to me? All morning we argued, Marlowe and I. The maid was here and heard us. The maid was off today at noon. I retired to my bedroom, and about two I went out. I spent the afternoon in a movie, Judd, I swear I did!"

"When I came back, he was here like this—dead. I called down to the desk. No, no one had come up to the apartment. No, no calls had come in. When I'd gone in my bedroom, he—Marlowe—had retired to his study and phoned the desk that he wasn't taking calls. He was angry. He wanted to pace his study and build his rage and look down at all the tiny people on the streets twenty stories below him.

"But someone *did* come, Judd! Up the back way. That's the way they had to come, the service stairs. When I realized that, I called you."

The words trickle out, husky, quivering. "You see it, Judd? You're not a fool. Our argument—the motive. No one in or out. And I'm trapped here, twenty stories above the street, with his stinking corpse!"

She clings to me and goes sliding down

until she is kneeling before me. "Judd," she whispers, "tell me you'll help me!"

The laugh knots in my throat. The words won't come. *This is retribution, Babe. You've been asking for it all your life!* But my lips say, "Anything you can give me that'll help?" Guts cold with hatred. But I have to know, see? If she has killed him, I am the one to dish out the proof with my own hands.

"A lead, Judd? No."

"Then I guess I'll have to start it cold." I walk around the desk. I look again at the mound of dead blubber. Just a bullet hole in the temple. No gun, no papers on his desk. In an ashtray a cigarette stub. And I stop there. I pick up the stub, look at it. It is a queer stub in this fine apartment, the crushed stub of a roll-your-own cigarette. I drop it in my pocket.

I look at her. She is looking at me. There is promise in her eyes, if I get her out of this. I say, "Yeah, I guess I'll have to start it cold."

* * *

It is getting dark when I come out on the street. I feel people brushing past me. I look at the heavy stream of traffic. I stand on the curb, and I know one thing: one of the men killed him. One of the broken, ruined men took Marlowe Magentra's life. And that leads to the question of which man? The one who lost the most? The one who was the most given to brooding? A sensitive man, nourishing his hatred day after day until, combined with his crushing sense of loss, it built into an explosion? If these given premises are combined in one man. . . . Of course, I don't know all the men, perhaps, but there is one man I know in whom all these premises are combined.

His name is Emile Scarett.

I start out, and I read pages out of Emile Scarett's recent life: from one cheap rooming house to a cheaper one. He was drunk here. He was in a fight with another roomer there and was run off. I think that no lifetime is long enough for a rising man to reach what he might eventually become. But if he starts downward—a few weeks, a few months will plunge him from the pinnacle into the gutter.

At eight I stop for a spaghetti feed. Though it is early spring, the winds are still sharp and I am chilled through my

threadbare clothes. The food warms me. I pay with some of the change in my pocket. I am almost broke and think of the nice office I once had. I wonder about tomorrow. Tomorrow I might send her to the electric chair—but if somebody else goes, if she is innocent, tomorrow will not matter a great deal.

At nine I find Emile Scarett. I have traced from the last rooming house to Brophy's bar in a cheap end of town. The bar is crowded and the nickelodeon sounds brassy. It is a tough crew lapping up the liquor and the place is heavy with clouds of smoke. The place smells.

I make my way over to his table. He is sitting, staring at the drink before him, and I think that if he hadn't been pointed out, I wouldn't recognize him. I never knew him really well, but he has changed since I saw him last, wasted away, his frame big and gaunt now, his eyes sunken, his mouth tipped down, daring somebody to get tough with him. Hoping somebody will get tough with him.

I say, "Hello, Doctor Scarett."

He stiffens. He stares at the drink. He doesn't move for a moment. He thinks he is hearing things.

He looks at me, and I have to remind myself that he is not over forty years old. "Judd," he says. "The private detective. I remember. Her parties."

Her, he says. Not calling her Charlene. No name needed. There is only one 'her,' even now. Cold hatred in our guts.

I sit down. He runs his fingers through his blond hair. It was once crisp, curly, neat blond hair. Now it is shaggy and very dirty.

"Have a drink, Judd? It's been a long, long time since I saw you."

We sit and look at each other. We vied for her attentions once. We almost hated each other, even though we never really got acquainted. All that is gone now.

"No, no drink," I say. "I am just wondering what you were doing, going up to her apartment today."

I watch his face. I catch the flicker in those sunken eyes. I see the shift of shadows. And cockle burrs roll along my back. I know I have it. I know he was there today.

"Her apartment?" he says. "Ch—Charlene's? I wasn't there, Judd."

"You are lying," I say.

We sit, looking at each other. The crowd cackles; laughter ebbs and flows about us. "What time were you there, Doctor Scarett?"

He looks at the drink. He pushes it back. His shoulders sink. He whispers: "A little after two."

"Why? What did you want there?"

"I can't tell you."

"But you will."

HE TAKES the drink now. His hand is shaking a little, a hand that just missed fame. A rising young surgeon, a spectacular man. Genius, they called him, after that last brain operation.

"Yes, you will tell me," I say, and he starts to rise. I reach across the table, and push him back in his chair. A few people glance at us. But we are just two guys back in a corner. We are not fighting. The people do not care.

Scarett's chair is against the wall. I pin him in the chair. I pin him back against the wall. I hate to do it, but I slap him back and forth across the face, twice. "Yes, you will tell me," I say.

For an instant there is a flicker in his eyes. He will fight me. Then the flicker is gone and the eyes are dead and dull again. He crumples inside, like a brick wall toppling over.

"A week ago," Scarett breathes through the bitter twist of his mouth, "I got ideas. I was going to make a comeback, be a doctor again. There was a girl. . . . But no need to go into that. The girl had faith. I listened to her."

"I went to a rich man on whom I operated once. I bought myself a second-hand suit and went to him and told him that I wanted a loan. Do you know how much it costs to outfit and open a doctor's office, Judd? Even a cheap office in a cheap end of town?

"The rich man and I were friends once. I saved his life. He said then that if there was anything he could ever do. . . . You know. Well, there was something he could do now. But he must have seen Magentra the next day. Maybe they had lunch together. Maybe they belonged to the same club. I hadn't figured on that. Of course it was natural that the rich man would mention the broken doctor who had come to

him. It made luncheon talk. Small talk.

"When I went back to the rich man's office, he wasn't in. I went back four times, and he was never in. Maybe Magentra was a big client of his. After the fourth trip, I got drunk. I moved away. And the girl I met—I tried to forget her. . . . Today I went to Magentra's apartment."

"You planned to kill him?"

"Yes, but I hadn't the chance. He was already dead when I got there. I went up the service stairs. I tried his apartment door. It was unlocked. . . . Magentra was dead, in his study."

"And you saw nothing?"

Scarett is silent.

"What did you see? Tell me, Scarett!"

He drops his head and I hear his sob. "As I went up the service stairs, I heard someone coming down, running. I did not want to be seen. I stepped back in a doorway, into a broom closet. Through the cracked door, I saw the man—but he did not see me."

I can feel the little pounding in the hollow of my throat. I was a detective too long before she came along. Even now, I

still have detective blood in me. I feel my nerves begin to whine, like wires in a high wind. "And this man you saw—you recognized him?"

Silence.

"*You recognized him?*"

"It was Curt," Scarett whispers. "Why did you come here, Judd? Why did I have to tell you?"

"Curt?" I say. "Curt Harrison?"

He nods.

I stand there for a minute. A full, long minute, shaking and feeling sweat beading on my face. Curt Harrison and his clarinet. Curt Harrison and his band. Curt Harrison reaching for fame. Curt Harrison is good. Tomorrow Curt Harrison will be one of the top band leaders of the nation. Tomorrow? Now, tomorrow?

"You see why I hated to tell you," Scarett says sadly.

"Yes, I see."

I stand thinking. I remembered a party, months and months ago at the Magentra country place. I was there. Emile Scarett was there. A hundred people were there. There was a band playing, led by Curt

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Harrison. So she must have looked at him, then and there. But I hadn't known that she'd drawn Curt Harrison into her life.

Judd, the detective. Some cheap crook had been trying to blackmail her. She came to my office. She was dressed in black, and so very, very innocent. She had done nothing, a foolish moment perhaps, but nothing really wrong. The cheap crook had cooked it up. Will I scare him off? So I met her.

Emile Scarett, the doctor: her appendix went haywire. Nothing but the best for her, the rising young genius to do the surgery. And she was so very, very dependent on her doctor. So Scarett met her.

And Curt Harrison. A party. A handsome young man leading an orchestra at her country place. So Harrison met her. Yet I am stunned, because I do not know there has been anything between her and Harrison. I wheel from Emile Scarett's table.

He says, "You're going to Curt Harrison's?"

"Yes."

He gets up. "I'll tag along with you, Judd."

I say nothing. It doesn't matter whether he tags along or not. We go out of Brophy's bar.

CURT HARRISON answers the door. It is a nice apartment in a nice, quiet building in a nice neighborhood. He is a lean, wiry, dark young man, very good looking. He says, "Judd!"

"Hello," I say. I nod to Scarett. "Doctor Emile Scarett. You might remember him, Curt."

"Yes. Yes, I've seen him around the night clubs several months back, with—with—" He breaks it off.

I say, "With Charlene Magentra. Close the door, Curt. We want to talk about Charlene."

"I—I was just geting ready to go to work," Curt says. He is wearing black pants and white, boiled-front shirt. He has not yet mounted the collar and tie.

I close the door. The apartment is very quiet. Scarett stands without moving. I look at Curt and I see the fear etched on his face, sudden and deep.

"What about Charlene?" he breathes.

"Her husband was killed this afternoon."

"Was he?"

"Scarett saw you coming out of the building."

The muscles jerk in Harrison's face. He looks at Scarett. He swallows hard.

"Did you kill him, Curt?"

He laughs, a dissonance that will not resolve nor leave the air. His hands are shaking. He must have something to do with his hands. He walks across the room, seeking a moment to gain composure. His hands will not quit quivering. He picks up a tobacco pouch, spills tobacco in a paper. The nimble fingers of his right hand form a cigarette.

I am not a good detective.

Always exercises for those supple fingers. A dozen different exercises, practiced constantly. But the ability of the flashing fingers of either hand to form a cigarette is more than a mere exercise. A mental quirk. The way some men carry a lucky piece, the way some women put faith in a certain perfume that was successful on one important occasion.

It was hard times when Harrison was trying to get a start in music. He couldn't get a break. He left his house one day and when he was several blocks away discovered he had left his sack of tobacco in his room. He had just enough for carfare uptown and a skimpy dinner. He went back for his smokes—and found a small-time band leader knocking on his door. The leader needed a man that night—and Curt Harrison's musical career was launched in a greasy night club. Because of a sack of tobacco in the time when he was down to pennies and nickels.

I watched him light the cigarette. "Yes," I say sadly, "you killed Marlowe Magentra."

From my pocket I take the crumpled cigarette stub I have taken from an ashtray in Magentra's study. "In the excitement of the moment, Curt, you forgot that you had left this."

He is white, white as a dead man. He stares fascinated at the roll-your-own stub in my palm.

"They have ways of comparing the saliva residue you left on the paper," I bluff, "like fingerprints. Like no two noses or ears are ever exactly alike. Scarett saw you leaving. The fag butt will cinch it."

He drops his cigarette from nerveless

fingers, and it lies on the carpet, dying, sending a last trickle of smoke up in the room. He is backing away, and I say, "Why did you do it, Curt? Because of Charlene?"

A moan tears out of his lips. He moves very fast. I am caught flatfooted, staring at the gun he has jerked from his desk.

"Charlene," he says. Hatred cold in his guts. "Yes, Charlene. Charlene is like fire to me."

"We know," I say. "Scarett and I know."

"I had a vocalist," Harrison says, his body twisted over the gun, his face not quite sane. "She committed suicide. She was on the dope. Then I found that a rumor was starting. That I was carrying on an affair with the girl. That I fed her dope. That I might even have killed her. There is no proof against me, and I am innocent. But a rumor, I know, does not need proof. And I cannot actually prove it is false. A columnist got it, printed a hint of it. I traced the rumor...."

"To Magentra," I say.

"I went there today," Harrison says. "I have a gun. Working late hours, coming home in early morning, I got a permit for the gun. But I did not intend to kill him. Only to scare him. He was alone in his apartment, when I went up the back way. You cannot imagine the names Magentra called me, the things he said he was going to do to me. He did not understand how it is with me, that if I lost my music I'd wish I was dead. We were arguing. And the gun was in my hand. I did not realize it, until I heard the gun go off and saw him fall to the floor."

I look at Harrison. The dreamer. The sensitive, finely drawn musician. The amation. The ruin.

I hear Scarett speak for the first time: "You'll have to put the gun away, Curt."

Scarett is walking toward Harrison. Scarett's face is very old. The face of a ghost, a man who once was. He is seeing the ruin in Harrison's eyes. Scarett knows. Scarett feels. The three of us here together, three products scorched by her fire.

Scarett is still moving closer to Harrison. Harrison is against the wall now. I try to speak. I can only look at Scarett. Perhaps he is frightened. Perhaps he wants Harrison to kill him. Perhaps he feels

suddenly that he must do one decent thing more in his life, must stop Harrison before Harrison gets away from here with the gun. He is thinking that Harrison eventually will be cornered and killed. He is thinking of the million deaths Harrison will die meanwhile. He is thinking that the only thing for Harrison to do is face the inevitable. Here and now. Call the police. Make a clean breast. Ruin it will mean, prison. But someday the prison will be over, and all the fears and pain carved out of Harrison's heart. It is the kind doctor in Scarett coming to the surface, perhaps for the last time.

But Doctor Scarett does not know Curt Harrison—does not know the fine edge, the excitability of Harrison. Not the way I know Harrison.

I know Harrison better than any man on earth.

A man should know his own brother.

I SHOUT. I spring for Scarett. I hear Curt screaming as Scarett grapples for the gun. I am almost between them. Then I hear the popping explosion of the gun and Scarett slides down an invisible wall, shot between the eyes, blood blossoming on his face.

Curt fights his way away from me, clubbing with the gun. I see the sweat on his face. I heard the chattering of his teeth. "I didn't mean it! I didn't mean to kill him, Judd! The gun—was like a thing alive, the way it was when I shot Magentra.... I couldn't let Scarett take me!"

He is crying. Like a baby. Like a crazy man with all the dams of hell breaking loose inside of him.

He runs from the room, and I am close behind. But he is gaining, getting farther and farther away. Down the corridor. Down the stairs. On the sidewalk. I see him knocking people right and left. I hear him crying....

I will wonder sometimes if he deliberately flung himself in front of the car.

I hear the sickening crash of his body against the car, the scream of brakes. The scream of a woman.

The whole scene is black night, bright lights, all tilting around me. A crowd is gathering. I push through the people. I hear a cop's whistle. I hear the driver of the car chattering words: ".... Ran right

in front of me. . . . Not a chance to stop. . . ."

I look at Curt's skull and know that he is dead, that the music is all gone.

I turn away. The gun, knocked from his hand, is lying against the curb. I pick it up. No one notices. I am very quiet about it, and all the people are interested in Curt, craning their necks at Curt.

When I drop the gun in my pocket, I take out the cigarette stub I have found in the ashtray of Magentra's study. I crumple it in my fingers. I am standing away from the crowd now, and I drop the crumpled stub in the gutter; a little breeze flutters the paper away.

I walk down the sidewalk—and she moves out of the shadow of a building.

"You have been following me since I left your apartment," I say.

She is twisting her hands. She is very dark and lovely in the night. "I saw Curt, Judd—run from the building. I'm sorry, Judd. Was—was it Curt?"

I do not speak.

"Did Curt kill Marlowe, Judd?" She is clutching my arm.

"You killed him," I say. "If a man has a gun in his hand, you do not blame the gun for killing somebody. Curt was the gun in your hand."

I hear her breath catch. "Don't tease me, Judd. I'm sorry about Curt. But he's dead now. It can't hurt him. Tell them he killed Marlowe! Tell them the truth!"

"I wonder sometimes what truth is, Charlene!"

I see her face, very white now. I hear her slavering words, crazy with terror. This thing is very close to her. "Judd, no! Marlowe's corpse up there, twenty stories above the street—the argument we had—no one in or out of the apartment. . . ."

I think: Only Scarett, Curt, and I knew who was in and out of her apartment.

Scarett is dead. Curt is dead. I died long ago. I will not speak. The girl vocalist who committed suicide, the girl on dope: Scarett, the broken doctor, the police will believe, was dealing in dope, using Curt in his job to get rid of the stuff. Scarett and Curt argue. Curt kills him, runs, is himself killed. The police will believe that. The rumor, remember? And I could tell them enough to make them believe it. Nothing else remains, except the corpse twenty stories above the street.

"Judd," she is mouthing, "you'll have to tell them! I'll make you tell them!"

"I do not know what you are talking about, Charlene," I says. "I haven't seen you in months."

I move away from her then, very fast. I do not look back. I hear her following me, almost screaming my name. I run through an alley. I run down a street. It seems I run a long time. At last I am in a bar. The bar is crowded: people are laughing and drinking.

I go in the phone booth. I dial Police Headquarters and say to the man who answers: "I had an offer a few minutes ago from a dame," my voice is changed and snivelling, "who wants me to move a corpse from apartment 20-C in the Delmont Arms. I dunno who steered her to me, but I quit the crooked stuff when I got out of stir last time. I'm on the straight and narrow, see. You'll look into it?"

"Whadda you think!" the official voice bawls. "Who is this?"

"Nix on that. And no use trying to trace this call. I'm in a public booth in a public place."

I slam the phone down. I wipe my face. I go out to the bar, elbow me a place. I wonder if they have picked Curt's body up off the street yet. I take all the money out of my pocket and lay it on the bar. "I wish to get drunk," I tell the bartender quietly.

THAT'S OKAY, DIMPLES

No less an authority than Police Councillor Max Tisza of Hungary makes the claim that dimples make folks honest. In all the cases he's handled throughout a long and active career, he never convicted a dimpled crook—except a lady who turns up periodically on the wrong end of a matrimonial swindle. She's just perverse.

—EJ

YOU CAN'T PLAY WITH MURDER

By JAMES A.
KIRCH



"Midget hi-jackers," I said.
"Now I've seen everything."

Ellen told Brad: "You can't play with mud without splashing it." But it was too late then—the little fat guy Brad had fingered was already dead. . . .

THE rain had picked us up on Twenty-second and stayed with us all the way uptown. It was a nasty, dirty night for the job ahead. There was always the chance, too, that the job would turn out to fit the weather. I was hoping it wouldn't, that we'd make him listen to reason, but we couldn't count on that. We had to play it the hard way.

We started in the Tally Ho just as we'd entered all the other bars; Eddie in front, ready to give the crowd the quick once-over, me tailing behind. I was half through the door when Eddie backed into me.

"Got him," he said.

I was almost sorry. The Tally Ho was wrong for our play. In a place like that, we couldn't just walk in and take him. We'd have to be smooth about it.

"We could wait him out," I suggested.
"Pick him up at the door."

Eddie weighed the idea. "So could anyone else," he reminded me. "If they're onto him, they'll be looking around."

He was right, but I still didn't like it. We had to get him out, and we had to be quiet about it. The Tally Ho wouldn't stand for trouble.

"You can't miss him," Eddie said. "The fat little guy near the end of the bar. Gray suit. No hat." He took a drag on his cigarette and shot it out into the gutter. "Give me five minutes."

I leaned against the window, flattening myself back under the narrow awning. The rain bounced like buckshot on the sidewalk. Eddie would be drenched by the time he reached the back exit. I kept wishing we'd decided to wait him out. The Tally Ho was too public. No matter what happened, somebody would remember us. It would be safer to catch him coming out.

Eddie had answered that. But I wasn't sure. I didn't like the job, any more than I liked the way we were handling it. Even though the guy meant nothing to me, even though he'd asked for it, I didn't like the idea of fingering him in public. But I didn't have much choice. I gave Eddie his five minutes, pushed the door open and went in.

He was in a fair spot; near the far corner of the bar, with nobody close to him. I didn't look at him. I draped myself at the bar alongside him and ordered a rye and water. When the bartender moved down the bar to fix it, I said, "Hello, Sammy."

He shrank. His fat little legs drew up on the stool, and his shoulders jerked together. He didn't look up and he didn't open his mouth. He didn't have to.

"We've been looking for you, Sammy," I said.

"You've got the wrong guy." It would have been funny if it hadn't been for the

way he said it. "Joe's my name. Joe Ryan. From Detroit."

The bartender brought my drink. He was another thing I didn't like about the set-up. He was round-faced, with thin little eyes that weighed me in to the pound. I waited again until he'd moved off and I kept my voice low.

"You're jammed up, Sammy," I said.

"Joe Ryan." He almost squeaked the name.

"Yeah," I said. "Okay. But you're jammed up. You ought to leave town. After we have a talk." I took out my wallet and drew five twenties from it. I slid the bills on the bar, under my hat. "It's all yours," I said. "And then I'll see that you get out of town. A hundred would take you half way to Frisco."

He kept trying. He knew it was no use, but he stayed with it. It was as if he felt if he kept saying it, I'd believe him.

"Detroit," he mumbled.

"Detroit," I agreed. "By morning. We know a trucker who's driving out. He'll take you along."

"We?"

"Me and Eddie," I said. "Eddie Joy."

I muffed it. I'd figured he was too far gone even to get off the stool. He didn't get off it. He pushed it from under him. And he caught me off guard. If he'd tried the front, he might have made it. But he headed for the men's room, in the rear. To the back exit. To Eddie Joy. So my end was over.

The bartender picked up my empty glass. "Your friend's got the monkeys," he said. He was a noticing guy.

I grinned at him. "Don't know him," I said. "But he looked in the dumps. I was spreading some cheer."

He didn't grin back. He said: "You're good at it, Mister. A regular St Nick. You oughta—"

That's when we heard it. It wasn't loud; it was just a sharp *wham!* It could have been a door closing, or a backfire. But if you'd ever heard it before, you'd know different. I knew different. So did the bartender. His flat, green eyes came alive.

"Cheer," he said. He was quiet about it.

THE guy who came busting out of the back wasn't quiet. He was a four-alarm siren, all by himself. He yelled: "Shot! A

little guy tried to climb out the washroom window. Somebody shot him!" He said it again, as if he didn't expect us to believe him. "Shot! He's dead!"

We believed him. Me and the bartender. I reached for my hat. Hard fingers closed on my wrist.

"Steady," the bartender said. "Don't go away mad." I took my hand off the hat.

He picked it up for me. He let his left hand lay on the bar. "No hard feelings," he said.

So I'd figured him right. An angle boy; a percentage player. Out for a nickel. Or my hundred bucks. He handed me the hat. His left hand was still on the bar, covering the bills. His eyes were sure of himself. "Okay?" he said.

I took the hat without saying anything. I left him there that way, his eyes following me as I walked to the door. I wondered how long it would be before I saw him again, and what I could do about him. I knew he'd be around soon. He liked the smell of my money.

I had to walk three blocks for a cab. When I gave the driver the address, I heard the police siren wail in the distance. I wondered if Eddie had made it all right, but I wasn't really worried about Eddie. I was thinking of the little fat guy, and what he must have thought of me at the last second, just as the bullet ripped into him. I didn't like it at all, thinking of that. I decided maybe Ellen was more than half right.

That's why I hated going home. I hated facing Ellen's dark, searching eyes and telling her what had happened. Actually, I didn't have to tell her. It must have been written all over me. The smile never reached her lips. Her soft hands dropped from my shoulders.

"Bad?" she said. It wasn't really a question, the way she said it. She knew it was bad.

"Washout," I told her. "We found him at the Tally Ho. Eddie covered the rear while I went in and braced him. He made a break for the back exit."

"Eddie?" she asked.

"He's all right," I said. "There was only one shot. He has to be all right."

She didn't say *I told you so*. She said, more to herself than to me: "How will it end?"

I couldn't answer that. I didn't know. I went to the phone and called Paul Kronister.

"This is Brad Harkness," I told him. "You'd better get over here—fast." I hung up on him. I wanted Eddie there when I told him about it.

Ellen was seated on the edge of the couch, smoking a cigarette in quick, nervous puffs. Her dark, troubled eyes studied me through the smoke. "Can't you get out of it, Brad?" she asked.

I shook my head. Sammy Klein's dead," I reminded her. "You can't walk away from murder. It moves too fast. The police will tie Sammy up with us, in the end."

"But, Brad—" she started.

"Look, Honey," I told her. "It was my nickel that started the music, in a way. I've got to hear the record out."

Eddie came in just as I finished. That is, he came halfway in. He leaned against the doorpost. His eyes were haggard and the thin lines of his mouth worked jerkily. He couldn't keep his hands still.

Ellen poured him a drink. He drank half of it, then came on into the room. He didn't sit down. He stood near the table, bracing himself with one hand and holding the drink in the other. He took a short swallow, then looked up at me. "Close," he whispered. "Close, Brad."

I didn't say anything.

"Brad," he said. "Look, Brad, I couldn't help it. I was halfway down the alley, watching the rear door. He came through the window behind me. He didn't even turn the light out in the men's room. It was like shooting a duck."

It was a bad choice of words. Ellen drew in her breath. A fat little man, perched in the window, to be picked off like a duck.

Ellen said, "Eddie, you—"

Eddie tried to grin at her. "You sound like the police," he said. "But it wasn't me. I didn't even see the guy who shot him. He must have been laying at the end of the alley."

"I don't understand it," Ellen said. "How could anyone know he was there?"

"We found him," I reminded her. "They could have tailed us, or found him on their own. It doesn't matter to him how they did it." It mattered to me, some. I hated the idea that I'd maybe fingered him for them.

Eddie's glass was empty. Ellen motioned to the bottle, but he shook his head. "I'm all right," he said. He didn't look as thought he meant it.

"I called Kronister," I said. "He should be here—" The doorbell finished the sentence for me.

PAUL KRONISTER hopped through the doorway like a hungry sparrow. He was a small man, with a small, flat head and little green eyes. When he got excited, he used his hands when he talked. He used them now.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

I looked at Ellen and she rose and left the room. I didn't want her tied in with this.

I said: "It's Sammy Klein, Mr. Kronister. The art fence we've been looking for ever since we got the tip that he'd split with the men who stole your paintings. We found him."

Kronister's hands stopped moving. "Good!" he said. That was what he thought.

"He's dead," I told him, flatly. "Somebody else found him, too."

"Dead," Kronister repeated. He said it as if the word didn't make sense to him. "You mean he was killed?"

Eddie sketched it rapidly. "So it's a dead end," he finished. "They got him first."

Kronister tugged his lower lip. "How about the woman?" he asked. "The one who called and gave you the line on this Klein?"

I shrugged. "She was a woman," I said. "Probably Klein's girl. That's all we know. By the time we find her, the whole thing may be over and done with."

Kronister nodded. "Well?" he said. "What do we do?"

"We start over," I said. "Back to when you gave us the case. You claimed some valuable paintings had been stolen from you. You gave us a list. You said you didn't want publicity because you were afraid it would kill a prospective sale, so you called us instead of the police."

Kronister nodded.

"That doesn't wash," I said. "It never did wash clean. I want the truth."

Kronister's hands started moving. He said: "But I—"

"Skip it," I said. "This is murder. The

sooner we clear it up, the better our chances of saving our skins. Let's have it."

Eddie said, "He's right, Mr. Kronister."

"Murder," Kronister repeated. He didn't seem to like the sound of the word. He shrugged his shoulders, spreading his hands in front of him. "Suppose a government worker overseas stole some valuable paintings—and then needed some quick money. Suppose he sold them cheap to a man who was lucky enough to get them through the customs. Wouldn't the second man own them?"

That was debatable, but I was in no spot to argue with him. Not with Sammy Klein dead after I'd fingered him.

"That way," Kronister went on, "if they came into a third man's hands this third man would be unable to insure them—would have to sell them quietly."

I'd asked for it, and he'd given it to me. Smuggled loot, that Kronister bought from a crooked government worker and lost to a crowd of hi-jackers. Not nice, but it made sense. And it meant that the hi-jackers would do their best to sell the paintings back to Kronister. He knew what they were, what they were worth—he was the hi-jackers best market.

"All right," I said. "I don't like any of it, but we're all in it now. And it will have to break fast. It will have to be cleaned up before the police tie Sammy Klein's death in with us. That means somebody'll get in touch with you in a hurry. When they do, let me know."

Kronister said: "You figure on paying them off, Harkness?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't like them. I don't like the spot they put us on, and I don't like murder." I showed him to the door. I didn't tell him that I didn't like him either, but Eddie must have seen it in my face.

"We don't have to like him, Brad," Eddie said.

Which was right, in a way. We could like his money, without liking him. The way the bartender had felt about me. I remembered what Ellen had said.

Times have changed, Brad, while you've been gone. Too many people are money-mad. Even though you're honest, you can't play with mud without splashing it.

She could have added something else, if she'd known. You can't play with murder,

either. It doesn't splash, but it's catching. And it sometimes catches the wrong people.

I WENT in the bedroom and looked down at her. She was too lovely to even be on the edges of what I was mixing into. And she hadn't wanted to be. When I'd come back from the OSS, she'd tried to persuade me not to pick up the agency partnership with Eddie again.

But it was too late, now. I stopped thinking of that, trying to figure the case. I kept wondering how soon the police would start tying Sammy Klein's murder up with the guy who'd been talking to him in the bar. I kept wondering, too, when I'd see the bartender again. I was betting he'd be around soon.

He was, but I didn't see him. He'd already been at the office when I showed up in the morning. That boy wouldn't let grass grow on a grave. The elevator boy told me about him.

"Fellow was here to see you. Round faced. Kind of chubby. Eager beaver type."

"He go up?" I asked.

"Might've walked up," the boy said. "I told him you hadn't come in yet, and he hung around a while. He either took off or walked up."

Eddie was in the office when I got there. Alone. Evidently the bartender had decided not to wait me out. Eddie scowled when I told him about him.

"Easy to find us, if you mentioned my name in the bar. If he's around already, he may be trouble."

I remembered the bartender's quick little eyes and the way he garnered my century. "He is trouble," I said. "File him under T."

"Yeah," Eddie said. He got up and stretched. "Look, Brad. I been figuring. There's no sense both of us sweating out this contact."

He was right, there. If he had any ideas, I was all for his following them up. I told him that.

"Sammy Klein's girl," he suggested. "The one who phoned us the tip on him. I might get a line on her."

I doubted it. She'd come out when she was ready, and not before. But there was always a chance.

Eddie stopped at the door. "If you need me," he said, "Give Ellen a ring. I'll keep

in touch with her, in case you're out."

I said I would, but I didn't expect to need him. I was beginning to realize Ellen had been more right than I'd admitted about things changing while I'd been with the Government. Eddie Joy was as nervous as a rookie cop.

By the time the call came, I was on edge myself. It was a quarter of three.

It wasn't Kronister. It was direct. The voice said, "Joy?"

"Harkness," I said. "His partner."

"You'll do. Be at Seventh and Twenty-third in half an hour." The receiver clicked.

Like that. No threats. No warnings. Almost polite. This guy was sure of himself. Or maybe he was just a stooge hired to deliver the message. I called Ellen and told her to tell Eddie they'd made contact. I was at Twenty-third eighteen minutes later and waited exactly twelve minutes before a blue *Drive-yourself* car pulled up at the curb. The front door swung open and I slid inside.

The driver was nothing; a heavy-set, dark-haired man, with plenty of muscle through his shoulders. The blank look on his face suggested that his muscles weren't all in his shoulders. He wouldn't know a painting when he saw one. I pivoted in my seat and looked over the back of the car.

I just sat there, staring at the pair in back. At first look, I thought I was in the wrong car. They wore short pants, blue sport shirts open at the neck, and blue sailor hats. I'd have bet their scuffed brown shoes had Buster Brown pictures inside.

One of them said: "No cracks, Harkness." His voice came out in a shrill, piping squeak. The other one, the littler one, raised his right hand. He had a cigar half as thick as his wrist. He took a long puff and spat the smoke my way.

"Midget hi-jackers," I said. "Now I've seen everything."

Except for maybe an inch difference in height and five pounds in weight, they'd have passed for twins. Neither one stood forty eight inches. Their faces were the tip-off. They were 28 or 30, and a wise 30, at that.

"No cracks," the bigger one said, again.

I grinned at him. "I forgot my marbles, Fellows. I didn't know there was a game on." His little eyes narrowed.

The littler one caught Budd's arm and

said: "Skip it, Budd." He leaned forward, balancing himself on the edge of the seat. "Save the chatter," he told me. "We're ready to deal. We want twenty thousand."

"Me too," I admitted. It was dumb, but I couldn't help it. I couldn't act serious with them.

He ignored me. "We'll turn the paintings over for twenty grand. So cut the comedy and make sense."

I said: "I'd have to see Kronister about that."

His little head bobbed. "Naturally. You'll have to get the money. We'll call you tomorrow."

He didn't even wait for an answer. He said, "Frank," and the driver leaned across me and opened the door. We hadn't moved. We were still at Twenty-third and Seventh. I got out. I said, "Get this. I can't deal. Kronister sets the figure, not me. I wouldn't give a buck for the works."

The one called Budd said, "Kronister will." He stood up suddenly. His head came just over the seat back. His hand came up with it. The gun in his hand was half as big as his head. "Don't get the idea we play marbles, Harkness."

I WANTED to laugh, but I didn't. Something in his eyes stopped me. The little guy was off. My prodding had cut him. He was raging inside, and the hot fury showed right through his mean little eyes.

"Don't worry," I said. "I won't. I won't get any ideas about playing with you." And I meant it.

The little one caught Budd's arm, pulling him back to the seat. Frank slid the car in gear and they moved off.

I stayed on the corner, watching them. A taxi slid out from the curb a block down and fell in behind them. He was a little too close. He was crowding it. I'd told him to lay back on it. The sedan turned the corner and the cab driver swung in after them. He'd slowed down a little. He was playing it a little smarter, idling after them. The thought struck me that I'd have done better to have planted two cabs, one to tail the other, but I shrugged it off. It was too late, now. All I could do was hope the kid I'd picked was smart enough to stay with them.

He was. He was back in half an hour. He pulled over to the curb, driving slowly,

and I hailed him and jumped in. The way I'd planned it, anyone they might have watching me would have trouble making anything of it.

The cabbie was a quick-eyed young fellow, with a ruptured duck in his lapel. He swung half way around in his seat and grinned at me.

"Like fallin' off a log," he said. "They made one stop. The two kids got out. The driver took the car over to First Avenue and turned it in. He walked back to the house."

He was cutting across town as he gave it to me. He stopped at Twenty-first and Third and pointed to a house half-way down the block. "That's it," he said.

I stayed in the cab a minute, trying to figure it. "They didn't seem worried?" I asked. "Like they were trying to throw you?"

He shook his head. "A pipe," he said.

That didn't fit. The little men hadn't looked dumb. Crazy, maybe, but not dumb. They shouldn't have been that careless.

I gave the cabbie his ten. He looked at it a minute, then looked at me. "Look, Chief," he said. "I don't mind a quick buck. But I wouldn't want anything dirty. This is no snatch job, is it?"

"Snatch?" I repeated.

"Kidnapping," he said. "Those two little boys."

I remembered the little one's cigar. And Judd's gun. I grinned at him. "Nobody," I said, "would kidnap those boys. Not if they were right in the head, they wouldn't." I left him trying to study that one out and moved down the street toward the brown-stone house.

It looked empty. The front windows were boarded up; the stoop railing hung over the side. There was a *For Sale* sign, with the name of a broker. I walked past it, turned back and cut into the alley that ran under the front bay windows. The place had been class, once; the alley ran back alongside the house to a garden at the rear. The back windows were boarded as solid as the front. I'd bought myself a tough job of breaking and entering.

As it turned out, it wasn't tough. It was almost too easy. There was a basement door. The padlock was impressive, but the hasp pried loose as though it were used to it. I was in.

I was careful in the basement. I used matches to find the stairway and I kept as quiet as I could. It wasn't until I reached the hallway upstairs that I realized there was no need for quiet. The house was empty. I could feel the emptiness. The birds had flown. It took me twenty minutes to discover that they hadn't taken the eggs with them.

Kronister's paintings were stacked in the back room.

Which made even less sense than a mid-get with a gun.

That's when I started to get it. Not all of it, no; but a little. The first angle I'd had on the case.

Maybe it was smart just to pile the paintings in that way. Maybe they'd figured nobody would give them a second look. Maybe. And maybe not. That's what I had to find out.

I picked out the smallest; a portrait of a fat, merry faced Dutchman, with *Frans Hals* printed on the back. It wasn't signed, but I knew that didn't mean too much. A lot of originals aren't signed. And a lot of non-originals are.

I went out the way I'd come in, through the basement.

IT TOOK a while to locate the man I wanted. Vic Flemming was an art dealer, but he didn't have an office. He spent half his time in art galleries, the other half in bars. This time, he was in a bar. He pushed his whiskey aside and held the painting up to the light. He studied it for ten minutes, then dropped it on the table and picked up his drink. That was all I needed, but I wanted it in words.

"No?" I said.

"I'm drunk," he admitted. "But not that drunk. And Hals' work I know." He lifted his shoulders and set the empty glass down on the table.

I said: "That ties, Vic. Thanks." I rewrapped the painting and took it up to the cashier. "I'd like to check this," I said. I drew out a five. "And Mr. Flemming's check is on me." I left the girl holding the package and walked out.

So I knew. I was sure of it. But I didn't know what I could do about it. There was only one man who maybe could tell me. The bartender.

The thing is, a loose end like that, an un-

certainty, can nag you until you run it down. If this was like I thought it was, I had to be careful. So I had to find out, even if it meant going to the Tally Ho myself.

I went. But the bartender wasn't there. It cost me another five dollars and some fast talking to get his name and address out of the manager, but it was five dollars I had to lay out. Because I had to know about this. And I had to know fast. I figured the bartender could tell me.

He couldn't. I found him, all right. He had a little room on the top floor of a building six blocks from the bar. You went up three flights of stairs, walked to the back of the hall and went up another. It was a nice, private little place. It had been too private for the bartender.

He was slumped back on the bed, his shoulders against the wall, his big head hanging forward. If he'd been a few inches to the left, he'd have fallen right out of the window, four stories to the street. Not that it would have bothered him. Nothing would bother him now.

The light that hung from the ceiling was still burning. There was a water glass by the bed, with a little rye in the bottom of it. There was another glass, empty, on the bureau. The rye bottle was to his right on the bed, laying there just as if it had been dropped carelessly. I moved closer to examine it, letting my mind build up the picture. There was a streak of blood along the side of the bottle.

So he'd poured himself a drink. Somebody else had picked up the bottle, as if to pour another, and then brought it down across the bartender's head. Just like that. A friendly drink together—and death.

That made two. Two angle boys—two chiselers—two corpses. The little art fence shot like a duck in the window; the bartender squashed like a bedbug in his bed. Whoever was doing this had gone haywire. They were scared; and dangerous because they were scared. They'd reached a stage where they'd kill anyone who got in their way.

Anyone.

I didn't believe that. I didn't believe the cold chills that cut into my back. I said, aloud: "There's a limit." But I got out, fast, and down the stairs.

There is no limit to murder. There's no

pattern, once it's been started. That's the terrible thing about it. It breeds itself. Once a man has taken the step that puts him outside humanity, he'll take it as often as he has to, to protect himself. The first one is the hard one.

Sammy Klein had been that. The bartender had been over a drink. The next one. . . .

The nearest phone was eight blocks away. I dropped a quarter in the slot, the only coin I had, and dialed Ellen.

She talked too much. She wouldn't shut up. She said: "Brad, I've been trying to get you. I already told Eddie. The woman who phoned about Sammy Klein called again. She gave me her address. She says—"

I kept trying to stop her. I kept saying: "Ellen, listen! Ellen! Don't —"

The doorbell rang.

I screamed into the phone. "Don't! Ellen, don't—"

"Minute." She must have dropped the receiver when she heard the bell. Her heels clicked across the bedroom, toward the living room and the front door. "Don't!" I desperately begged. "Ellen, don't—" She was gone.

I dropped the receiver and ran to the street. A fat, red-faced man was pulling away from the curb. I jumped on the running board, pulled open the door, and slid in beside him. I choked out my address. "My wife—" I said.

He said: "What the—?" He grinned. "Your first?" he asked. He swung the car out, heading left, towards my house.

I didn't answer him. "Step on it," I urged.

He did. He laughed while he did it. "Brother," he said, "I been through it. I got five myself." The laughter dropped to a chuckle. "But you're the most scared father I ever saw."

He couldn't help it. And he was taking me there. He couldn't help the fact that his chatter was driving me nuts. And he couldn't know, couldn't know at all, that we were talking about two different things. The opposite ends.

At that, he did his best. He went through three red lights and made it there in sixteen minutes flat. I heard his warm chuckle as I flung open the door to his car and hit the sidewalk running.

THE house was quiet. There was no sign outside, no change, no indication of what might have happened. As I turned my key in the lock and threw the door open, I heard myself praying aloud that I was wrong.

But I wasn't.

She was in the living room, near the couch. She was all crumpled up into a ball. I dropped to the floor next to her, cradling her in my arms. There was a dark, damp spot on the side of her chin, another dark spot at the top of her head, and a thin streak of red down her cheek. I wiped the red off before carrying her into the bedroom. I kept talking to her, trying to explain that I'd been coming.

"I made it as fast as I could, Ellen," I said. "I tried to tell you not to let anyone in. And I came here as fast as I could do." I eased her to the bed and dropped beside her. Her dark hair had fallen in front of her eyes. I brushed it back gently. "They hurt you," I whispered. "Darling, they hurt you." I caught her hand in mine, clinging to it. "I wouldn't have let them," I said. "I would never have let them."

The outer door slammed. Footsteps crossed the living room. Eddie Joy appeared in the doorway.

"Ellen said—" he began. He stopped. His face went white. "She's hurt," he said. "The little rats hurt her."

I looked up at him. I shook my head slowly. "No," I said. "She's not hurt. Not any more, she's not. She's—dead." Even when I said it, it didn't seem true. I had to say it again and again and again before my brain would accept it.

"Easy," Eddie said. "Brad, don't—"

He was choking on his own words, and telling me to take it easy. What did I care about taking it easy? What did I care about holding on to myself? Ellen was dead. She'd been killed because I'd messed into something too dirty to touch.

I could have killed Eddie, then. He didn't know it, but it was close. I had to hold myself down on the bed, to keep from doing it. My hands were hungry for the feel of something to kill, something to crush for what had happened to Ellen. And Eddie had started it. He'd taken the case from Kronister. I couldn't let him live, after what had happened to Ellen. I held myself down with one hand on the bed-

stead, the other holding Ellen's cold wrist. I forced myself to look at her, to study the angle of the shot.

It had gone in low, under her cheek, and come out high on the back of her head. The gun had been held near the floor. Like in the hands of a kneeling man. Or a midget.

Ellen would have laughed at them. She'd have let them in, smiling at their cute little sailor suits, and told Judd to put away his toy cannon. Or she'd have raised her hands, playing a game for them, and run back as if she were frightened. She might have had a warning, have seen the viciousness in his eyes, just before the bullet dug into her throat. But she'd never had a chance.

I couldn't look at Eddie. When I was sure I wouldn't touch him, I forced myself to my feet and picked up the phone. I called Paul Kronister.

"This is Harkness," I told him. "We're dropping your case. Right. We're giving it up. We couldn't locate the paintings." I hung up before he could ask any more.

My hands were shaking. I couldn't have that. I went into the bathroom and let cold water run over my wrists until the chill began numbing them. I went back in the bedroom and got my gun out of the lower bureau drawer. I dropped it in my pocket and started for the street, Eddie at my heels.

His car was at the door. I got in and waited for him to slide behind the wheel.

I gave him directions. And I gave him part of the case while he drove. I had to keep talking to keep hold of myself. And I couldn't fall apart, now.

"Stooge," I said. "Brad Harkness, the murder stooge."

Eddie said: "I don't get it."

"Look," I said. "I got a call from the hijackers. They met me. They told me nothing they couldn't have said over the phone. And they let me follow them to their hide-out."

"Let you?"

I remembered the cabbie's words. "Like fallin' off a log," I repeated. "It was too easy. Way too easy. There had to be a reason for that. When I got there, I found the paintings. Phonies. Copies."

Eddie scrounged over the wheel. His thin lips tightened. "You figure they wanted you to find them? That they expected Kronister to lay out the money for a collection of copies?"

He was trying, trying hard. "That way," he said, "they'd collect both ways. Kronister would pay off, and they could still sell the originals."

I wondered if Eddie knew how long it took to make good copies, but I didn't ask him. I said: "Sammy Klein was a hitch in the deal. He knew the paintings were phony, and tried for a bigger cut. Sammy could have ruined the deal. So Sammy was murdered."

"Sammy—" Eddie began.

"The hell with Sammy Klein," I told him. I was done talking. I wanted to finish this, the only way I could finish it, now. I wanted to do something to dim the picture of Ellen crumpled up on the floor. "Left at the next corner," I told him. "And pull up a block down." I was out of the car before we'd stopped moving.

Eddie said: "You figure we'll have trouble getting in?"

I shrugged. "They're not looking for me," I said. "If I've figured this right, they won't expect me." I wasn't sure of that, but I was going to play it that way. It didn't matter much, any more.

BUT I'd called it right. We went along the alley at the side, through the basement. We were upstairs, on the first floor, before we heard them. Budd and his little sidekick.

I said, "I'll take it, Eddie. You cover me from the doorway." I heard the click of the outside lock, and I moved fast, throwing open the door to the back room. I was in before they knew who it was.

Those damned midgets. Like kids caught in a cookie jar. Budd squealed, "What—?" He saw Eddie behind me and choked off the squeal. The little one spun from the window. He got around halfway, then stopped. The big man, Frank, squatted on a packing case in a corner. He started to his feet.

Eddie said: "Hold it!" Frank stopped.

Budd said: "What the—?" His little face worked. He tried to hold back the grin.

A voice behind Eddie said: "Drop it, Joy."

That made the party complete. Kronister had showed.

Eddie asked me for the play. That's all he could do. Kronister had a gun in his back, but Eddie had the other three cov-

ered. He knew I could take care of Kronister. His eyes asked me the question, and I gave him the nod.

The rest of them caught it. The little one was fast, for his size. His gun came halfway out of his pocket before Eddie's first slug slammed into his middle.

Kronister fired twice. His first shot caught Eddie high, in the shoulder. Eddie triggered again.

He was good. He was too good for what happened to him. His shot opened Budd's throat before the midget could raise the gun.

Frank, the big one, was coming off his packing box when I fired. He sat back on the box, his arms jerking to his chest.

Kronister's second shot caught Eddie lower, where it hurt. Eddie went down. His head turned my way, and his eyes opened wide. He knew.

That's when I shot Kronister. I could have done it from the first. Eddie had counted on that. That's why he'd fired when I gave him the nod. He'd thought I'd take care of the man behind him. He knew better, now.

That helped. Not much, but a little. I wanted him to know.

He was sitting on the floor, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He was trying to say something.

I made it easy for him. I filled in the background. I said: "Kronister had dreamed up a neat little swindle. He had himself a collection of smuggled masterpieces. Only they weren't smuggled. And they weren't masterpieces. Only copies."

Eddie didn't say anything. He shook his head a little, as if to clear it so he could follow what I was saying. Maybe he wanted to be sure I had it right.

"He wants to sell his copies as smuggled originals. But he can't advertise. So he frames a burglary and hires us to recover the paintings. That way he figures word will get around, so that every shady collector in the country will hear he has some hot paintings for sale. It was a neat set-up. Not even the police could touch him, because if it came to a showdown, he could prove the paintings had never been smuggled. But a hitch developed. Sammy."

Eddie said: "You could have covered me."

I'd have laughed, if there'd been any laughter left in me. I said: "You took the case, Eddie. And you were in it from the

first. That's why Sammy Klein tried to bolt, when I mentioned your name in the Tally Ho. There was nobody else in the alley; you shot Sammy coming out the window. That's why when the bartender came around for his shakedown, you told me he hadn't been there. You took care of him yourself. Later. In his room."

"You had it figured," Eddie said. "All along, you knew."

"No," I said. "Not all along. Not until I found the bartender. Then I began adding it up. You'd taken the case. You located Sammy Klein. The bartender hung around our office, and got killed. We were the only ones who knew about him, Eddie. That's when I was sure you were in it. That's when I tried to warn Ellen."

"Ellen," Eddie repeated. "Brad, they shouldn't have done that. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"No," I said, bitterly. "Not you. You just fingered her for them. You warned them that Sammy Klein's girl had called her and told her the paintings were phony. And that she knew why Sammy had been killed."

"I thought they'd quit," Eddie said. "I thought they'd leave town. I—never—"

I hadn't been listening to him. I'd been remembering what Ellen had said: *You can't play with mud without splashing it.*

I remembered how hard it had been to keep my hands off Eddie's throat when he'd looked at Ellen's body and said: "The little rats." Eddie Joy. My partner, who'd never met the hi-jackers, but who knew they were midgets. It had been hard, then, but I needed them all. All together. And the only way I'd seen to work it was to get Kronister and make him believe I'd never found their hideout. It had been hard to hold back, with Ellen lying on the bed next to me. It was still hard, even with Eddie choking out his life on the floor. Even when he jerked upright, said, "Well, you squared it, Brad," and keeled over.

He was wrong about that. I'll never be able to square it. But I can keep trying. There are a lot of dirty, crawling people who need taking care of. And there's only one sort of man who can get down in the gutter and mix with them. A man who has nothing to lose.

A guy like me, who's all alone in the world.

THRILL

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

DOCKET



Mrs. Farquar, salty social lioness, invaded Headliner Files—who dug up data, dirt and details on celebrities. She haughtily demanded: "I want a full, complete report on a bleached hussy—a night-club entertainer who calls herself Iris Fisk. My simpleton grandson, here, swallows every pretty lie she tells him!"



When Thackeray Hackett, sardonic investigator for Headliner Files, phoned Iris' apartment he got a strange man who said he had hot, juicy news to peddle. . . . Arriving at the apartment, Hackett came face to face with blonde Iris who wouldn't let him in, saying: "Please, not now! Any other time, please. . . ."



But Hackett stuck around and from his hiding place, saw a notorious gambler help Iris carry a "drunk" out of her apartment. Iris said to the drunk: "You're a bad boy, drinking too much like this." Then Hackett saw that the drunk was leaking—not scotch, but something that was dark . . . and red.



Thackeray Hackett decided to withhold this racy report from the salty Mrs. Farquar—when he came upon his deadliest enemy, hanging in a clothes closet. . . . The complete story will be told in Frederick C. Davis' novel—"The Shroud Off His Back"—in September DIME DETECTIVE . . . published August 1st.

RHAPSODY IN BLOOD

**Stirring Murder-
Mystery Novelette**

By
ROBERT TURNER



CHAPTER ONE

Date With Death

BONNIE O'MALLEY leaned back against the closed dressing room door. She felt as though the bones in her legs had turned to rubber and would cave behind the knees. She couldn't seem to move away from the door. Bon seemed rooted there.

She looked around the dressing room, at the light bulbs around the dressing-table mirror. The pictures on the wall, glossy, autographed press prints, showed men and women she had worked with on the wheel. Some of them had made the big time, Hollywood or Broadway, and were famous, now. Some had married rich. A few had been swallowed into the great maw of oblivion that was smalltime show business. Some were dead.



While thunderous applause rewarded her sensational strip-tease, Bonbon Larue ran to her dressing room—to keep a tryst with the corpse of her kid sister's beau.





Bon angrily tapped his shirt. "I'd said I'd kill you—not him. . . ."

Her mind snapped suddenly into focus again and she reached up and took off a little skull cap of a hat without disturbing the long, blue-black hair that cascaded in sleek perfection around her shoulders. She walked over to the young girl sitting stiffly on a gold-brocaded antique chair near the wardrobe dresser.

"Aileen," Bon said in an everyday tone, as though nothing was wrong. "Aileen, stop that whimpering, please. Get hold of yourself—and tell me about it."

Aileen O'Malley didn't hear her, didn't look up, didn't stop that sucking, dry sobbing. Every time she did it, she jerked convulsively.

Aileen was young, nineteen or so, with mahogany-colored hair coiffured in a neat wind-blown. She had clear-cut features and a trim, erect figure; the model agency, college girl type. She should have been striding along Park Avenue, swinging a big, shiny black hatbox, on her way to some swank ad agency. That was for her. Not this. Not sitting in the stuffy dressing room, backstage of a Hudson City burlesque house, with the shakes—with the screaming meemies coming on.

Needle points of perspiration studded Aileen's upper lip and her forehead. The edge of her teeth showed between her lips. Her hands wadded a wisp of handkerchief into an ever tighter ball.

Bonnie O'Malley, more widely known as Bonbon Larue, here in Hudson City, New Jersey and in Boston, Baltimore and other points along the Schwarz-Hartman Burlesque circuit, saw that her sister, Aileen, was likely to break down and scream any moment. Bon slapped the younger girl, leaving the imprint of her fingers on the pale cheek.

Aileen took a rasping deep breath and stopped sobbing. She looked up at Bon and some expression came back into her face. She came up off the chair and flung herself into Bon's arms. "Bon," she cried, "I—I thought you'd never come. I didn't know what to do. I sat here, waiting and waiting. Bon—Ollie's dead. Oliver Smith—Smitty—he's lying over there, dead, Bon! Didn't you see him?"

"I saw him." Bon held the other girl tight against her. She turned so that Aileen's back was toward the dead man on the other side of the room.

There was a long divan against the opposite wall and he was sprawled on that—with the long, sharp shears rammed into his back.

Bon thought about Oliver Smith. He had not been handsome, not rich, and not a smart boy. Just a good, everyday Joe with plain features and thinning blond hair and kindly, honest blue eyes. He was an advertising copywriter, making a decent salary and with a little money in the bank.

Smitty and Aileen had been going together for almost two years and Bon had been happy about it. She knew her men—if anybody did—and she knew she would never have to worry about her kid sister with Oliver Smith. Sometime in the future, she'd supposed, they'd get married and then she'd never have to worry about Aileen again. It had been working out very nice.

Aileen straightened up, away from Bon and pushed the wadded handkerchief into her eyes and against her nose. She looked so young, Bon thought, so damned young, standing there with her eyes and nose red from crying.

"Look, Angel," Bon said softly, "you've got to tell me about it. We've got to do something about this . . . You—Aileen, you didn't—"

Aileen shook her head wildly. "No, Bon! I didn't kill him. I couldn't. He was so sweet, Bon, How—could anybody kill Smitty?"

"I don't know." Bon sighed. "Tell me all you know about it."

"There isn't much to tell," Aileen said. "I got the afternoon off. I decided to come over here and see you, thought maybe we could do some shopping after the first show. I—I didn't know Smitty was going to be here. Why would he come to see you, Bon? . . . Anyhow, I walked in and—" She couldn't finish.

The ten minute buzzer sounded.

Bon said: "I got to go on. Another half hour shouldn't make any difference. Maybe we can think of something to—"

"No, Bon!" Aileen stopped her. She was staring past Bon, at the dead man on the divan. "I won't stay alone with him, while you go out front. We've got to call the police, Bon."

Bon shook her. "Stop it," she commanded. "Listen to me, Honey, this is murder and the cops are going to want to

know all about it. They're going to want to nail somebody for it. Look, kid, do you know what the papers will do with this? I'm a burlesque stripper and you're the kid sister I brought up from the time you were a little runny-nosed brat. I sent you to the best schools. I was your mother and your sister, both, for eight years. You know what they could make out of this? Something phony like maybe Smitty was making a play for me, too—or maybe he wasn't a nice guy and I had to protect you from him. They could make a dozen rotten stories out of it, unless we can figure something."

Bon reached up under one arm and unzipped the side of her black jersey, skin-tight dress, then whisked it over her head. While she finished undressing, she said:

"You're right, though. You can't stay here. Look, there's a little bar and grille, half a block away, on State Street. You go there and wait for me. I won't be long. I won't take any encores, today. You hear?"

Bon went to the wardrobe and pulled out a set of shimmering silk, flame-red lounging pajamas and stepped into them, hooked and snapped the wrists and neckline and the pants around the waist. Then she slipped into the chair in front of the dressing table, switched on the mirror lights.

Aileen was still standing, stiffly, in the middle of the room.

Bon said: "Get going, Honey. Breeze. I'll see you in less than half an hour. Don't worry about anything. I'll get you out of this. Beat it, now."

In the mirror, Bon watched her sister walk toward the door. She heard the door slam shut and Aileen's heels beating a tattoo along the hall toward the stage door exit into the alley.

Well, that takes care of that, Bon thought. With a little luck, the kid's out of this. All that's left—is for me to get out of it.

HUDSON CITY'S Alhambra Theatre was packed to the rafters. It was an old-time cigar box of a burlesque house. Smoke hung like a fog and the air was close, foul. Most of the audience had their jackets across their laps. Their shirts stuck to their backs with perspiration as they leaned forward in their seats, tense, ex-

pectant and impatient. The voice over the P. A. system bawled:

"We give you that dazzling, daring, dynamic lovely of lovelies—that atomic bombshell of beauty . . . *Bonbon Larue!*!"

The whistling and stomping and yelling rocked the house as the old asbestos curtain slowly rose to reveal the stage. Gradually the noise subsided into one mass, indrawn breath of delight. The pit band tore into a loud and blatant version of *Oh, How I Hate To Get Up In The Morning!*

Standing in the wings, where he'd arrived just a few moments too late to catch Bon before she went on, a man watched her performance. He was a little better than average height. He was dressed conservatively in dark gray, with a maroon and gray tie nestling a little crookedly against his soft collar. His eyes were cold and gray and sardonic.

Those eyes had seen things. They had seen men cut to ribbons in a Mexican shiv fight. They had seen a woman's black-hooded figure jump and burn in an electric chair. They had seen a noose snap a man's neck and they had seen the worst that war can offer in blood, death and destruction. Those eyes had looked, without a flicker of emotion, upon primitive Central American tribal orgies that made hardened explorers go sick in the gut.

Now, the eyes of Ricky Flynn, the newspaperman, were watching Bonbon Larue go into action and a barely perceptible warmth flickered in them for a moment. He took a round toothpick from his vest pocket and sucked on it moodily.

Out on stage was a canopie bed. Bonbon Larue was in it, when the curtain rang up. She sat up now, rubbing her eyes sleepily and swung out of the bed. She stood up, facing the audience. She yawned and stretched, tigerishly. The flame-red silk pajamas rippled and shimmered and grew taut as she twisted and turned in that glorious stretch.

The Alhambra Theatre's audience sat entranced, wordless, every man among them feeling strangely as though he shouldn't be there, that he was surreptitiously spying on a lady arising. No ordinary lady, either. She was tall and slender, yet had an unbelievably voluptuous figure. Her hair was like a satiny black hood down over her shoulders. She had high cheekbones and

wide-set, smoky, Irish blue eyes. The long lashes that tangled over them were like strands of black hemp. Even her fingers and toes were long and beautifully formed, the nails delicately tinted.

Gracefully, in time with the music, Bonbon performed setting-up exercises. And as if by some magic, as she moved about, the front of the pajama top unhooked and opened. The audience sat silently enraptured.

In the wings, Ricky Flynn leaned his stocky figure against a back-drop, pushed his hat to the back of his head. A husky voice next to him said:

"Dam', man, there's a beautiful woman for you! She's got that audience in the palm of her hand. Ain't another woman in Burleycue, could leave her clothes on like that and keep 'em quiet out front."

"She's all right," Ricky Flynn said. He hooked one tip of the toothpick between his teeth, pulled down on the other end with his thumb and forefinger and flipped the pick end-over-end out onto the stage. "She was always all right, Bon was."

"You know her?" the husky voice said.

Ricky turned his head casually, saw a gnarled little old stage carpenter there.

"Yeah, I know her," Ricky said. "Least, I used to. Must be nearly ten years since I've seen her. She was just a chorus kid, then. This is something new for a strip act, isn't it? I never saw them do anything else but come out and take it off and bump and grind and throw themselves around. This looks a little fancy."

"It's a novelty act Bonbon cooked up," the old man said. "Like I said, nobody else could get away with it. Couple of 'em have tried it and flopped. But Bonbon's act is the sensation of the business. Course she gives 'em a little of the other. She can do that, too, alright."

Ricky watched and saw that was so. Bonbon Larue had halted the setting-up exercises. Now was taking off the pajamas. She did it slowly, every movement of her arms and hands a poem of grace. The pit band softly played: *A Pretty Girl Is Like A Melody*.

The house lights had gone off, now, and a specially made spot switched on in its place. It was shaped so that Bonbon stood bathed in the rose-tinted glow of a keyhole-shaped light. The rest of the stage and the

theatre out front was a thick pitch black.

Bonbon Larue finally stood there clad only in a filmy net bra and tights and flung the silk, flame-hued pajamas away into the darkness. She stretched with catlike laziness once more and broke off in the middle of it as the band suddenly blared into a fast number. From there on, it was straight burlesque routine as the rose spot followed her sinuously graceful gyrations up and down stage.

After a few minutes, the curtain started to come down and Bonbon Larue raced for the wings, winking and throwing kisses out to the madly cheering audience. Just off-stage, she grabbed her robe from the back of a chair, slipped it on. She saw a man standing there but paid no attention to him until he grabbed her arm.

"They want more," he said just above the thunder of sound from the audience. "Why don't you give 'em a break?"

Still not looking at him, she tried to pull her arm free from his grip. She couldn't do it. Even though he seemed to be holding with effortless ease, his fingers were like a steel band around her arm. She tore at them with her hands.

"Not today," she said. "I'm in a hurry. I've got to go. Let go, dammit!"

CHAPTER TWO

Tease-Queen's Trouble

THEN she looked up at him. His gray eyes looked into hers, cold and bored.

There was a mildly amused twitch to the corners of his full mouth, that was all. Bon stopped struggling to get away. Breath seemed to stick in her throat.

"Rick!" she gasped. "Ricky Flynn!"

"Sure," he said quietly. "Little Bonnie O'Malley, front row, third from the right, at the old Gem Theatre, Chicago,—last time I saw you. You've come a long way since then, Baby. You always were something that got in a guy's eye but you were never anything like this. The years have been good to you." His eyes went over her swiftly. "I said I'd see you around some time, remember?"

She couldn't take her eyes away from his and she still spoke like she couldn't get her breath. "I remember," she said. "That was long ago and far away, Rick—but I remember, all right. You gave me

one of those light, quick kisses and a wave of the hand and said, 'So long, Baby, I'll see you around' and you were gone. Nobody ever did that to me before, Rick—nor since. *I* was always the one to pull that gag."

"I knew that." There was a quick grin that showed an even row of small white teeth. "You sore that I beat you to the punch?"

"No," she said. "Not sore, Rick. Let's say I just never forgot it." A shadow seemed to suddenly pass over her face and her dark blue eyes grew stark. "Rick, I—I can't stand here. I'm—well, there's some trouble. I got to take care of it. Where can I get in touch—"

A long-drawn scream, fire-whistle sharp, cut her off. The piercing sound came from backstage, down along the hall that led to the dressing rooms. "What the hell was that?" Ricky Flynn said.

Bon grabbed his hand. "Come on," she told him. She pulled him after her, in and out between scenery backdrops. They turned down the hall that led to the dressing rooms. All along the hall, doors were open and people were coming out of them.

Bon and Ricky pushed into the little cluster of chorus girls and mannequins and comedians gathered around the door of Bon's dressing room. Most of the girls were half-in and half-out of their costumes for the next number. One of the comedians was wearing a tramp outfit and makeup, with huge red lips painted around his own and sporting an enormous putty nose. The staring horror in his eyes gave his face an incongruous look.

All eyes turned to Bon and Ricky Flynn as they pushed through the crowd. Standing in the doorway of Bon's dressing room was a slenderly built blonde girl, wearing a black velvet evening gown that looked as though it had been painted on. She was leaning against the door jamb, staring at the divan.

"It's Ruby St. George," Bon told Ricky. "One of the other strippers." She turned to someone in the crowd around the door. "What happened here?"

"Look inside, Miss Larue," a little red-headed chorus girl said. "There's a guy in there. He—he's dead. Someone stuck him with some scissors—in the back."

Bon stepped to the doorway and looked

inside. Everything was the same. Smitty's dead body was still sprawled on the divan. Blonde Ruby St. George turned to Bon.

"Bon," she said, "it—it was terrible. I wanted to borrow some of your powder. I didn't think you'd mind. I—well, I barged in and put on the lights and I saw *him* lying there—"

A MAN pushed between Bon and Ruby, stalked into the dressing room and went over and looked down at the face of the dead man on the divan. The newcomer was a big man, with solid looking shoulders under a worn but carefully pressed tux. He had sleek, shoe-polished-looking black hair that came to a widow's peak in front. His face was handsome in a pale, dissipated sort of way but the green eyes were set too close together and his mouth had a too-red, moist look to it. Now it curled at the corners in a sneer. He was Jackson Marks, the crooner, M.C. and straight man of the company. He said:

"You really did it, eh, Larue? You really did kill some guy for messing around with your kid sister." He gave a nervous little laugh. "I'm glad I had sense enough to stay away from her after you warned me."

"What are you talking about?" Bon demanded.

"You know damned well," Marks said. Frown lines knit between his eyes. "That dead guy was hanging around your sister Aileen. I saw them together a couple of times in a New York night club."

"That doesn't mean I killed him," Bon said. "Suppose you keep your nose out of this." Bon angrily tapped his shirt. "I said I'd kill *you*—not him—if you didn't stay away from Aileen. I probably would have, too, Mr. Jackson Marks. I've bumped into wrongos like you before. I wouldn't let you get within a mile of Aileen. Smitty was different. He was a good guy. He—"

"Hold it a minute, Bon," Ricky Flynn stopped her. "You don't have to argue with this jerk about it. Has anybody had sense enough to call the police?"

The mob around the door all started babbling at once. Jackson Marks glared at Ricky Flynn, started toward him, fists balled and then stopped. His eyes stayed with Flynn's cold gaze, then dropped.

A round little man, with a moon face and a waxed mustache came pushing through the mob around the door. He waved his arms excitedly.

"What in hell's going on here?" he demanded. "We got a show to put on. We got an audience waiting out there. Everybody out for the finale. What do you—" He broke off suddenly as he saw Oliver Smith's body. He stabbed a stubby finger toward it. "Who—who's that?" he barked. "What's *he* doing here? What's the matter with you people, you can't keep drunks out of your dressing rooms?"

"Not drunk—dead," Ricky Flynn said, bluntly. "Who are you, Sonny? You run this place?"

"Who am I, he says." A blue worm of a vein writhed on his forehead. The spiked ends of the mustache quivered. "Only Sid Haskins, the manager of this theater, that's all." His mouth stayed open for a moment, then he blurted: "Dead? Why doesn't someone let me know what goes on around here? Who are *you*?"

"I'm Flynn," Ricky said, "the New York *Star*. That's a newspaper. They say. I came out here to do a feature on what happened to Burlesque since it was kicked out of New York."

Haskins clapped both hands hard against his bald head. "Reporter!" he groaned. "A dead man in our star's dressing room—and a reporter!" He suddenly whirled on the crowd of performers. He made a shooting motion with his hands. "Scram, all of you. You've got to get out there for that finale!"

Bon hung back when the others scooted away. Haskins told her: "You, too, Honey. The star of the show, you're the feature of the finale. Go on with the others."

Ricky Flynn said: "Since this thing happened in her dressing room and she knows the guy who was killed, maybe Bon ought to stay here. The cops won't like her gallivanting off. How's about Blondie over there taking her place?" He jerked his thumb toward Ruby St. George, who was standing beautifully erect, taking it all in.

Ruby fluffed out her yellow-gold hair. "Sure," she said. Her heavily mascaraed violet eyes threw Flynn a warm, interested look. "He's got something there, Sid."

Haskins put his round face between his hands and rocked his head. "Okay, Ruby. Beat it."

With a wink at Ricky Flynn and a litte flirt of her hips, the blonde stripper left the room.

Ricky sighed, said: "There's something about slinky blondes with baby-doll faces —something I don't like."

Sid Haskins pursed his lips and delicately touched the spiked ends of his mustache. "They say gentlemen prefer them. Maybe so. Douglas Lamont seems to. He's going to marry Ruby."

"Who's Douglas Lamont?"

"Who's Lamont, he asks. Only one of Hudson City's wealthiest men. A millionaire several times over. He owns the Lamont silk mills."

Bon said: "She'll bleed him for every cent he's got."

"Meow!" Ricky Flynn grinned at her. He asked Haskins: "How is about calling the cops? Bon and I will stay here and guard the body."

"Oh—yeah!" Haskins strode off, slapping the top of his bald head.

Bon took Ricky Flynn's hand, led him into the dressing room across the hall. "We can use Ruby's room."

Ricky watched her shut the door and come close to him. "What's this mess all about, Bon? he asked.

"**I**'VE got to get away from here before the cops come," she told him. "I've got to, Rick. They'll probably hold me on this. Aileen's waiting for me in a bar down the street. I've got to get to her. The poor kid will be worried sick."

Quickly, then, Bon told him the whole story. When she finished, Rick said: "It's funny. I come over here on a run-of-the-mill feature story and I bump into you—and this."

Bon said: "Yes, it is funny. When I first saw you, when I came off stage, I thought you'd gone out of your way to look me up. But you were just after a story."

"Baby," he told her. "Story or no story, if I'd known you were here, I'd have come out. I used to think about you a lot, Bon, after I left Chicago. Sometimes I used to think I was nuts for going away. But it was the only thing to do. You were only a kid but you'd already made a name

for yourself. No guy ever lasted more than a couple of months with Bonnie O'Malley, they said. Well, the time was almost up, so I made the break, but quick. It would be better that way. I figured, too, it was time you got a dose of your own medicine."

Her eyes went all over his face. "Ricky," she said, so softly he could hardly hear. "Ricky, you dumb, ugly clunk, what made you so sure the time was up with you?"

She moved in close to him and her arms went up and curled around his neck, pulled his head down to hers. Ricky just stood there for a moment, with her mouth twisting against his, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. Then his fingers suddenly splayed open and his arms went around her.

His hat fell off and neither of them even noticed it. Finally, though, Rick broke away.

"Baby, Baby!" he said, "Cut it out. You've got to get out of here. Haskins will be coming back. The police will be here. Your kid sister's waiting for you, remember?"

A pulse beat rhythmically in the soft white column of Bon's throat. "All right, Rick," she said. "All right."

She turned away from him and went out of Ruby St. George's dressing room and across to her own. Rick picked his hat up off the floor, shaped it and put it back on his head. Then he went over to Ruby's dressing table, bent to examine his face in the mirror. He rubbed off smears of lipstick and greasepaint.

Straightening up, he reached out and took the lid off a huge powder jar. The jar was half filled. It came to him then, too, that a blonde like Ruby wouldn't use the same shade of powder as a brunette like Bon.

So Ruby had lied. She hadn't gone into Bon's room to borrow some powder at all.

He started pulling open drawers of the dressing table. In the bottom one he found Ruby St. George's purse, fingered through it hurriedly. It contained the usual woman's knick-knacks, keys, compact, nail file, a couple of odd buttons and a small, personal bank book. He flipped open the book and it gave him what he was looking for. The account was made out to Ruby

Kosky, the blonde strip artist's real name. He put everything back into the purse and returned it to the drawer. Then he left the dressing room. Swiftly, he made his way toward the red light bulb that marked the stage door exit.

CHAPTER THREE

Strictly Dead-End

THE stage doorman was a white-haired, rheumy-eyed old fellow with a booze-flushed complexion. He was sitting on an ancient straight chair, tipped back against the wall. He was idly flipping the page of a girlie magazine. He looked up as Flynn approached.

"Busman's holiday?" Flynn asked, flicking the old man's magazine with his forefinger.

"Eh?" the watchman said. He shifted a wad of tobacco into his cheek, looked down at his magazine. "Oh, this. Yeah, I like purty gals. Never get tired of lookin' at 'em. That's why I took this job. Got a season pass, too. My day off, I take in the show from out front like a gentleman. 'Bout all an old man like m'self can do is look. Now, a young bucko like you, son. If'n I—"

"Sure," Flynn stopped him. Then he looked toward a rickety old desk and a battered ledger lying on it. He asked: "You keep a record of everyone's arriving and leaving time?"

"Sure."

Ricky Flynn stepped over to the desk and the opened ledger book. He ran a finger down the listings of the names of people who had come in and out of the stage door, this afternoon. It was hard to make out the old man's cramped writing but he noted that Ruby St. George had come in at twelve, noon. The next entry was that of Oliver Smith. He had come in at ten past twelve. There was a blank space after that which showed signs of an erasure. The following entry was Bonbon Larue, at twelve-forty-five. Flynn turned to the doorman.

"That blank space," he said. "Who asked you to do that, Bon, or her sister, Aileen? This has been a profitable day, I would say, for you, Pop."

"Eh?" The old man's pale blue eyes

stared at him blandly. "Larue's sister, Miss O'Malley? Ain't seen her for several weeks."

Flynn grinned and went out onto the street, turned in the direction the doorman had said Bon had taken. Just as he was moving away from the stage door, he heard the shrill scream of a police car siren coming down the block. He walked a little faster.

He found Bon sitting at the bar of a small tavern, near the corner. She was burning a cigarette down a quarter inch at a time with deep drags. Flynn hiked up on the stool next to her and said:

"Where's the kid?"

"I don't know," Bon told him. "She must have got frightened and skipped out."

He ordered a double scotch. "Where to? Where would she go?"

"Home, probably. She has a small apartment here in Hudson City, over on the west side of town."

"Not so good," Flynn said. "That's the second place the cops will go, looking for you. They'll check at your hotel first and when you're not there, they'll go to Aileen's. They'll find her there and start shooting questions. If you want to keep her out of this, we'd better figure some way to stop that from happening."

"How, Ricky?" She took his hand in her own icy fingers.

"I dunno, right off. There's some things I want you to tell me. First off, how much did you give that doorman to erase Aileen's name off his time record book?"

She looked at him, bewilderedly. "The stage door watchman? I didn't give him any money."

He sipped at his scotch. "Then it wasn't you. It must've been Aileen herself. That's a break. Maybe we can keep her out. . . . Now, what do you know about the blonde toots, Ruby St. George?"

"Not very much. She's been with the Schwarz-Hartman circuit about three years. Came up from a mannequin's spot. She's not bad. The customers seem to like her. She's flashy, has everything in the right place and can make it look like she hasn't a bone in her body. I heard her real name, once, but I don't remember it."

"Kosky?" Flynn said.

Bon shrugged. "Something like that."

Flynn tossed off the rest of his drink, pulled a toothpick from his pocket and stuck it into his mouth. Watching him, Bon said:

"You ought to go to a dentist. That's a bad habit."

Flynn grinned, took the pick from his mouth and looked at it. Then he pulled back his lips and showed two rows of perfect white teeth. He held up the toothpick. "With some people, it's gum, or peppermints. With me, it's toothpicks. They're flavored. Spearmint. When I get the flavor off, I throw them away." He bent the pick between his thumb and forefinger, released one end suddenly and the little sliver of wood spun across the room.

"Let's get back to the blonde, this St. George creature," he said. "Do you know of anything that might link her with Smitty?"

Bon's smoky blue eyes went wide. "Are you kidding? Oliver Smith and Ruby? They were worlds apart, Rick. That is, as far as I know. Their backgrounds are altogether different. Smitty never had anything to do with show business."

"He'd never been to the Alhambra before? How come he was there today?"

"The answer to the first question is no, Rick. The second one, we'll probably never know. Yesterday I got a very strange letter from Smitty. It didn't say much but it sounded very urgent. He said he wanted to come to the theater today, to see me about something very important. Something about himself and Aileen, that he wanted my advice about."

"You don't have any idea what it was?"

Bon took a sip of the martini setting on the bar in front of her. "Mm-nn," she said. "He asked me to get there a little early so we could talk. I overslept. I was late, instead, and I never got to talk to him."

FOR several moments, Ricky Flynn perched on the bar stool, knocking his knees together, his hands jammed into his trousers pockets. His lower jaw was set tightly and his cold gray eyes stared straight ahead.

Finally, he said: "I can't get it out of my head that Ruby St. George is in this up to her goldilocks, Baby. Where did she come from? Her home town, I mean?"

Bon thought about that. "Somewhere in Pennsy, I think. In the coal-mine district."

"How about Smitty?"

"That's easier, Rick. A little town called Slateville. That's in Pennsylvania, too." Her jaw dropped, suddenly and a bright light came into her eyes. "Say, that's funny. I remember, now. Slateville was the name of Ruby's home bailiwick."

"That's more like it," Ricky Flynn said. "We're beginning to get somewhere. Ruby St. George is scheduled to marry a money-bags named Lamont. What's the angle on that, anyhow?"

Bon shrugged. "What do you think? Lamont's fat, fiftyish and foolish. Ruby met him at a party and she practically put a collar and leash around his neck in nothing flat. She went to work. She let out all the stops and she nailed him."

"All right," Rick said. "Supposing there's something in Ruby's past—maybe something that happened years ago in her home burg—that she wouldn't want anybody to know about? Maybe if it came out, it would ruin her chances for this rich marriage. They come from the same town, so let's make out Smitty knew her, knew this thing about her?"

She got down off the stool, suddenly. "Rick," she said. "I'd better get back to the theater."

"Why?" he said.

"If I do that, they won't get hold of Aileen. Maybe it'll keep them away from her—she'll be out of it."

He warned: "They're going to hold you—until something better comes along. But maybe I can supply that something better."

They left the tavern, went out onto the street and Bon squeezed his arm hard. "Just one thing—promise me you won't disappear on me again. Don't say, 'I'll see you around some time, Baby,' and run off on me again, Rick."

He stopped and turned her toward him. From the back of his throat, he said, huskily: "You like burlesque, Baby?"

"It's a living," she whispered. "It gave me dough to do the things I wanted for Aileen, good schools, good clothes. But I guess I really hate it, Rick. I'm sick and tired of it, I guess. Why?"

"Ten years ago," he said, "I was a fool, little Joe Jerk. I'm not so foolish any

more. If I can get you and Aileen out of this mess, Baby, maybe we—"

He stopped and Bon's eyes clouded. She held her breath. "Maybe what, Rick?"

Almost roughly, he turned away, started walking toward the stage door again, pulling her with him. "I dunno," he said. "Let's wait and see how this comes out."

BACKSTAGE of the Alhambra was a beehive of activity. There were several uniformed cops hanging around the hall and Homicide Bureau tech men going in and out of Bonbon Larue's dressing room. Members of the burlesque company, Sid Haskins and the men of the maintenance crew of the theatre, were lined up along one wall.

Two men were walking up and down in front of them. One of them was short and stocky, with a blocky red face under a tipped-back, battered fedora. He was holding a notebook and writing rapidly with a fountain pen.

The other man was tall and painfully thin. He had a long, saturnine face, and a cigarette bobbed from his thin lower lip. He wore a spotless pearl-gray hat, the crown dented in and the brim snapped Broadway style. A hand-painted tie nestled against his starched white collar. About a hundred and fifty dollars worth of fawn-colored gabardine suit did its best to hide the lank gauntness of his figure. He looked like a successful bigtime bookmaker.

When Ricky Flynn and Bon came along the dressing rooms hall, they were met with an excited babble of voices from the whole burlesque company. Sid Haskins stepped away from the wall, came toward them, spluttering, waving his arms wildly.

Flynn put his fingers against the stage manager's paunch and held him off. "Crawl back into the woodwork," Flynn said. Then he turned to one of the uniformed cops. "Who's in charge here?"

The cop nodded his head toward the tall, impeccably dressed man who now was coming purposefully toward them. "Lieutenant Ganza," he respectfully addressed the thin man, "this must be Bonbon Larue and that newspaper guy."

Ganza stopped in front of Bon and Flynn. The squat little man with him, paused alertly beside him, his notebook and pen poised.

"Flynn, *New York Star*," Ricky said. "Lieutenant, Miss Larue. We didn't mean to be gone quite so long, Lieutenant. I figured we could get back before you arrived."

Lieutenant Ganza had a long, sharp nose. On each side of it, his eyes were small and hooded and bottle green. They caught and threw off lights like glass marbles. The cigarette jerked in his mouth as he drawled softly: "Quite all right, Flynn. You shouldn't worry yourself about us. So you're a newspaperman?"

Ricky Flynn nodded. He looked bored. He kept his gray eyes looking straight into Ganza's. There seemed to be no expression on Flynn's face at all. He even looked a little sleepy.

"I thought newspapermen were aware of police rules and regulations?" Lieutenant Ganza said. "Might I say it's an offense for someone to take a vital witness away from the scene of a murder, before the police arrive?"

"Yeah, you can say that," Flynn admitted. "All right, I took liberties. Miss Larue, here, was badly hit by what had happened. You can understand that. She needed a drink. She needed it right away. So I took her out to get one. I took good care of her. I figured you wouldn't get sore, her being in such good hands."

"Good hands, Flynn? I don't seem to get you. You're right, you do take liberties. I'm afraid it's going to get you into some trouble. Some big trouble."

"You know a man named Pat Hallack?" Flynn asked. "You know that bald headed, gimlet-eyed old heller?"

Lieutenant Ganza allowed his prominent Adam's apple to go up and down, disturbing the set of his hand painted tie against his collar. The cigarette in his mouth tilted at an abrupt angle. "The Commissioner?"

"Is that what he is, now?" Flynn asked, innocently. "When I knew him, he was just a precinct captain. One night they pulled in a looney and he dragged a gun from under his pants leg and was poking it at old Pat Hallack. I kicked the gun out of his looney's hand. Old Pat, he sort of thought I saved his life. He said, any time he could do me a favor. You know—" He shrugged.

Lieutenant Ganza Adam's apple wreaked havoc with his tie and collar. He poked

the cigarette from between his lips with his tongue, let it fall to the floor. His mouth came open and stayed that way as he said: "I heard about that. You're *that* Flynn?"

"I was police reporter for the Hudson City *Tribune*, at that time," Ricky Flynn admitted. "One of my best pals was a leg man, named Geraghty. Heard something about he was managing editor, now. That paper carry any political weight in this town?"

Ganza showed long white teeth in a grin. He put his hand on Ricky Flynn's shoulder. "Maybe we can forget that little violation with Miss Larue," he said. "I'm sure she's ready to cooperate with us, now."

"If you'll excuse me," Flynn said, "I'll go hunt up Haskins' office and use his phone to call that paper of mine. Could be they'd like to have this story. Sometimes I forget I'm a working man."

He reached out and put his fist lightly under Bon's chin, said, "Take it good and easy, Baby," and walked on down the hall toward the wings.

When Flynn came back Lieutenant Ganza told him they had taken Miss Larue as a material witness. Ricky Flynn said that he understood. Then Ricky ambled back down the hall and out the stage door.

At the same bar where he'd sat with Bon, Flynn phoned his paper. He asked them to check with Slateville, Pennsylvania, on a girl named Ruby Kosky.

About an hour later they called back. Ruby Kosky's father had been a foreman at the local mines and he'd been killed in a cave-in. Ruby was born there, 1920, had won a local beauty contest and left home to go to New York to go into show business. That was the gist of it. Strictly dead-end for Flynn. When he came out of the phone booth, he went to work on the telephone directory.

CHAPTER FOUR

Meet the Hell-Kitten

THE small apartment house was on a quiet, elm-lined residential street. Just the kind of place a man, such as Bon had described the dead Smitty, would live. The bell plate said Oliver P. Smith lived in 3 A. Flynn found the vestibule

door open and went inside and upstairs.

The door of apartment 3 A was ajar and when Flynn put his hand against it, it swung in and open. He stepped into a tiny hall and stood there for a moment, listening. Somewhere inside the flat a faucet dripped monotonously.

Flynn moved along the hall to a small, conservatively furnished living room. Between window drapes, late afternoon sun beamed in. Flynn saw a picture of a pretty, dark-haired girl standing on a table. There was an inscription on it that said: "With love, Aileen." Then Flynn walked over to a desk with the drawers pulled out onto the floor. Their contents, papers, bills, letters, were strewn all over the rug. Then his eyes swept around the room and he saw the man sitting in the lemon colored barrel-backed chair.

He was a slender, dapperly dressed little man. His hands gripped the arms of a barrel-backed chair. His features were almost effeminate and his curly blond hair was dappled with gray at the temples. He was staring straight at Ricky Flynn. His lips were drawn back across slightly bucked teeth and he looked like he was grinning. But there was nothing for the man to grin about. He had a black, ugly hole right center of his forehead, oozing wetly.

Flynn stepped swiftly over the mess of papers on the floor toward the dead man in the chair. Deftly he flipped back the corpse's lapel and dug into the inside jacket pocket. He brought out a wallet, a couple of letters and a folded newspaper clipping.

He examined them quickly, his ear cocked for the sound of footsteps in the hall. The police might take a notion to come here at any moment. The wallet held three twenty-dollar bills and a single, and a private investigator's police card. The name on the card showed that the dead man was Walter J. Oxley. The letters were advertisements. The newspaper clipping, when Flynn unfolded it, showed a picture of Ruby St. George in all her blonde loveliness and professional dishabille and a brief account of her engagement and planned near-future wedding to Douglas Lamont, Hudson City's silk-mill tycoon.

Ricky Flynn hurriedly put the stuff back into Oxley's pocket. He turned and went back to the welter of litter on the floor,

hunkered down in the middle of it and started desperately pouring through it. He came to parts of a torn snapshot that had begun to yellow with age. He was able to put enough parts of it together to see that it was an outdoor shot of a boy and girl, very young, with their arms around each other. On the back of one of the segments of photographs was written: "Ollie and Ruby—1936"

In the same pile of desk litter with the torn photographs, were ripped parts of what looked like a legal document. Flynn got several small parts together, enough to see that it was a State of Pennsylvania marriage document. He was rummaging through the rest of the papers, avidly, looking for the part with the names on it, when a board creaked behind him.

He tried to turn and straighten at the same time. Something smashed the back of his skull. As a million vari-colored lights pinwheeled before Flynn's eyes, he wondered how he could have been so dumb.

Flynn fought off the sweeping blackness, pushed his hands hard against the floor and tried to get up. Chairs, sofa, walls, windows, were wheeling around his head. In that mad merry-go-round, he saw a pair of slender, silken-clad ankles, and a pair of man's shoes and trousers next to them. One of the men's shoe, with a black-pointed toe, kicked him in the cheek. Then something hit him on the back of the skull again—and the big blackout came.

The sun was no longer shining through the window when Ricky Flynn came out of it. He got up onto hands and knees, felt the back of his head, where a lump the size of a walnut throbbed crazily. He touched the bruise on his cheek and worked his jaw up and down. It didn't feel as if it had been broken. He felt of his teeth and they were all there. They hadn't done too much of a job on him.

HE CRAWLED to a chair and pulled himself up, stood there, swaying and looked around the room. Walter Oxley, the private dick, still sat dead in the barrel-backed chair. But all signs of the rifling of the desk had been removed. All papers had been picked up and the drawers were back in place. The waste basket next to it had been emptied.

Like a knife thrust, it came to him that he'd been here dangerously long. Flynn bent to pick up his hat and almost fell on his face. He re-shaped the hat which looked as if somebody had jumped on it. Tenderly, he hung the hat on the lump on the back of his head.

In the small bathroom of the apartment, he hurriedly stuck a towel under the cold water faucet and swabbed his face with it. In the mirror he saw that his cheekbone was puffed and purple. *Hero Flynn*, he thought on the way out. *Boy Scout Ricky, out for a merit badge. . . And for what?* Then he remembered Bon and the way she'd felt in his arms, the way she had kissed him. He remembered the rosy glow of the spotlight that had high-lighted her beautiful body on the stage at the Alhambra. He remembered the way she had looked, in the flame lounging pajamas, getting out of that canopied bed and the way things had been with them, ten years ago, before he'd run out on her like a skittish young colt.

A block from the apartment house, he flagged down a cab. Riding into the center of town, Flynn thought back over all that had happened. The things he had found in Oliver Smith's apartment rounded out his story. The feminine ankles he had glimpsed might and might not have belonged to Ruby St. George. But he was stopped cold on the identity of the man.

The hack dropped him off in front of Hudson's City main hotel, a twelve-story edifice that sported a doorman with enough braid for a convention of admirals. The lobby was large and gloomy, with drooping overhead chandeliers and great potted palms stuck here and there between stuffed chairs and divans.

The desk clerk came equipped with *pince nez* and thin black, crawling eyebrows. He looked down a ski-jump nose at Ricky Flynn and informed him that Miss St. George was not in her room. He did not know where she could be found or when she would return.

Flynn turned away from the desk disgustedly. Then he noticed a slender, young, dark-haired girl, coming from the cigar stand with a couple of packs of cigarettes in her hand. She walked to the elevator bank and entered one of the cars. Her hair was fixed in a neat wind-blown and she

walked with the slim ease and poise of a junior model. Flynn kept staring at her until the elevator door shut, trying to think where he had seen the girl before. It worried him, ate at his brain for a moment in a way that told him it was important. And then it hit him.

He remembered the picture on the dead Oliver Smith's table. The girl who had just gone up in the elevator was Aileen O'Malley, Bon's sister. He raced for the elevator bank, caught another car, just going up, before the doors closed. For some fool reason, Aileen wasn't staying at her own flat, but had come here to Bon's room. He had to tell her what the setup was, find out if the police had gotten to her yet.

"What floor does the burlesque company use?" Flynn asked the elevator operator.

The operator was a roly poly little man, with a bad complexion, whose tight uniform collar looked like it was choking him. He had sharp, birdlike little brown eyes and he looked at Flynn as though he thought maybe he was contemplating peeking through keyholes.

"Seventh, Bud," he said and started to say something else but Flynn stopped him.

"None of your snide remarks, either, Dumpling."

"Snide?" the operator said.

"Skip it," Flynn told him.

The lift stopped and Flynn got out just in time to see Aileen O'Malley turn around a corner of the corridor. He ran lightly after her, turned the corner himself and stopped. She had disappeared. Then he saw the door of one of the rooms slowly closing. He got to it just as it slammed shut. He stood there for a moment, listening to the sound of radio dance music coming from inside the room. Then there was the sound of a girl's voice. Flynn knocked on the door.

TH E radio suddenly shut off. Nobody came to answer the knock and he banged harder this time. In a few moments, the door cracked open and the face of Jackson Marks, burlesque M.C., showed.

Ricky Flynn started to say: "I'm sorry, I must have the wrong—" He stopped, as the door started to slam in his face. "Just a minute," he said and laid the whole weight of his stocky body against the door. He forced it open and stepped inside.

Marks staggered back, regained his balance. His pasty, handsome face glared at Flynn. With Marks' shirt off, Flynn could see the muscular breadth of the M.C.'s shoulders and chest. Marks' biceps rippled with carefully developed muscle.

Ricky Flynn said: "Maybe I haven't got the wrong room at all, Marks." Flynn's eyes flicked around the small hotel room, took in the bucket of ice and bottle of bourbon and two highball glasses on the dresser. The mirrored door of the bathroom was closed. There was no sign of Aileen O'Malley.

Jackson Marks, the straight man of the burlesque company, said: "You can't come busting into my room like this. Beat it, Bub, before I call the house dick and have you thrown out."

Flynn's teeth showed in a quick grin. "I wouldn't do that," he said quietly. "Tell Aileen to come on out. It's all right. We're just going to have a friendly little talk."

Marks' close-set green eyes blinked. His damp, red looking mouth got sullen. "There's nobody here."

Flynn leaned against the door, pushing it shut behind him. "You ought to rub those lipstick smears off the side of your neck. Come, come, Marks, you're a straight man, not a comedian. I saw Aileen walk in here. Cut the gag, and tell her to come out."

He didn't have to. Aileen O'Malley had heard him. She opened the bathroom door and came out into the room. Up close, now, Flynn saw that she was very pale and that there was a slight glassiness to her brown eyes. He saw, too, that she was very pretty in a sub-deb sort of way, just the sort of girl a guy like the conservative, dead Smitty would go overboard for. She was wearing a skirt and blouse and a little bolero-type jacket. The jacket hung open in front and Flynn saw that Aileen was built small but with exquisite perfection.

"Hello, Kiddo," he said. "What are you doing here? Playing little Red Riding Hood?"

A little smile flicked the corners of her mouth and she sort of lowered her head and looked at him sideways and up from under her lashes.

"No, I guess not," Flynn said, looking at the reddish smears on the side of Jackson Marks' throat. "Little Red Riding Hood was a dummy. She didn't recognize a wolf

when she saw one. Something tells me, Aileen, that you know the species pretty well."

"Who are you?" She had a husky, curiously monotone voice. "Jackson, who's your friend? He's cute. You have such cute friends, Jackie." She walked over to the table and grabbed up one of the highball glasses, downed it. The way she did it, Flynn could tell she was no stranger to the stuff.

"I'm a friend of your sister's, Aileen. I knew you when you were a scrawny, gangly legged kid. I thought Bon wanted you to keep away from this guy? She wouldn't like you being here, Kid. I thought you were Smitty's girl?"

"Smitty," she said. She made a little simpering laugh. "Poor, poor old Smitty. He was cute, too." She pulled in her waist, tucked in her blouse. "'M I still scrawny and gangly legged? You like me better now? None of Bonnie's business who I go with. You tell her that. None of her damned business."

She didn't look drunk. She was standing straight enough, no sway. But her eyes had a strange, blank, catch-light glint to them. Her mouth and her small, pert features were too lax, too loose. Something was the matter with her. Maybe it was a combination of liquor and something else. Maybe benzedrine or a barbiturate, along with the liquor.

She walked slowly toward Ricky Flynn, came right up against him. The little smile kept flicking on and off at the deep corners of her mouth.

"You want to know something, Mister? Bon's a jerk. She thinks I'm a little sweetie-pie. She tried her best to make a little Alice Blue Gown out of me—but it didn't take. How do you like that, Mister? Bonbon Larue, the strip queen, the runway baby, trying to put a halo around my head. I let her think that, though. I let her have her fun. And I had mine—on the side."

She took hold of his lapels and ran her fingers up them. She came up on her tiptoes, her face reaching up to his. That close, he could smell the heavily liquored breath of her. He could see pinpoints of perspiration breaking out on her high, pale forehead and her eyes looked like brown-tinted ice-balls.

"You're *awful* cute," she said. "Isn't he,

Jackson? Go away, Jackson, and let me talk to your friend."

Jackson Marks didn't do that. He came across the room. He grabbed her shoulder and whirled her away from Flynn, across the room and she fell sideways over the bed. She lay there, staring at Marks, her lips pulled back from her teeth. In that same deadly monotone, she called him a list of gutter names.

Ricky Flynn felt his stomach turn. Here was the kid Bon had spent long years of her life, working for, had given the best of everything. The kid sister Bon worshipped to the extent of being willing to take a murder rap to keep her name clear. He saw how it was. Bon had so wanted the girl to be everything fine, everything nice, all she saw was what was on the surface, let herself be blinded to what was inside her sister. Bon, who had been around, who knew human nature and men and women so well, had developed a blind spot for her own sister.

Aileen O'Malley was one of those strangely twisted products that the best finishing schools and all the love and attention in the world, sometimes turn out—a first-class, spoiled little stinker.

Flynn said: "Aileen, do you know where Bon is—right now?"

SHE turned her head slowly toward him, pushed herself up into a sitting position on the bed. "Sure," she said. "In jail, probably. But don't worry about it, cute boy. She'll get out in due time. They—they haven't got anything on her."

"Why don't you shut up?" Jackson Marks shouted at her. "Keep that dirty little mouth of yours buttoned." He turned to Flynn. "What are you trying to do, get the kid upset? Why don't you get out of here and leave us alone?"

Flynn was looking at the girl on the bed, he was staring at slim, silken-clad ankles. He turned and his eyes went all over Jackson Marks. With his skivvy shirt, Marks was still wearing his razor-creased, satin-striped tuxedo trousers. He was wearing black, pointed shoes. Flynn put his fingertips to the tender bruise on his cheek. Then he took a toothpick from his pocket, stuck it into his mouth. Around it, he said:

"Maybe I was wrong about Ruby St. George. Maybe she could have just spotted

Smitty going into Bon's. Maybe Ruby could have just been curious about her husband—and taken a peek in Bon's room. Maybe that wasn't an act she pulled. It could really have shocked hell out of her to see him in there, dead."

"What are you talking about?" Marks asked. Lines formed between his brows. "Ruby St. George didn't have any husband."

"Yes, she did, Marks. I saw the torn parts of the marriage document up in Smitty's apartment a little while ago. And pictures of the two of them, when they were kids. They came from the same home town. Figure it out."

"All right," Marks said. His green eyes moved constantly. "What's that got to do with us?"

"I don't know for sure," Flynn told him. "But I'm getting a lot of ideas. Aileen, here, was going with Smitty for a long time, before she met you. Maybe she really liked the guy in a way. Maybe she just put up with him to make Bon happy."

"Smitty—he—he was cute," Aileen said tonelessly from the bed.

"Smitty and Ruby had never been divorced, it seems," Flynn went on. "The way I figure it, Smitty wanted to marry Aileen, here. But first he had to find Ruby and get a divorce. Let's say he hadn't heard from her in years. She was in burlesque, under another name, but he didn't know that. So he hired a private op to do that job for him. A guy named Walter Oxley.

"Well, Marks, Oxley found Ruby. He also found a beautiful setup. The blonde, figuring maybe Smitty was dead or something, was passing herself off as single, was all set to grab a millionaire hubby. If Smitty suddenly turned up, it would cut her out of all that. . . . Do you get it, Marks?"

Jackson Marks didn't answer. He just stared at Flynn, the artery working in his thick neck, the bicep muscles of his arms, tight. He dug a hand into his pocket, pulled out a package of crumpled cigarettes. He stuck one in his mouth.

"Got to get a match," he said and went over to his jacket, hanging across the back of a chair. But instead of the matches, he pulled out nickel-plated pistol. He pointed it at Flynn. "Go on," he said. "Run off at the mouth some more."

"Is that the one you shot Oxley with?"

Flynn wanted to know. "What was Oxley doing at Smitty's place when you and Aileen went up there?"

"We called him, had him come out, stupid. We figured when he heard about Smitty's death, knowing what he knew, he'd figure things out. We couldn't take any chances on that."

Ricky Flynn said: "I can see that. It isn't so hard to figure, once you know part of it." He turned to Aileen. She'd got up off the bed now, was standing stiffly, her palms flat against her thighs, fingers spread out. "Smitty wrote to your sister, upset as hell about something. I guess maybe he told you about Ruby and you figured it for a good spot for some juicy blackmail. Only Smitty wasn't that kind of a guy. You should have known better, Honey."

SHE lifted one hand from her side, pointed a finger at Jackson Marks. "It—it was that dummy," she said. "He talked me into it. I told him it wouldn't work with Smitty. But it was Jackie's brilliant idea. He said I could make Smitty do anything, a goof like that. So I tried. I kept after him but I couldn't talk Smitty into shaking down Ruby."

A twitch came into one corner of her mouth, as she went on: "And then I stopped in to see Bon, today and I find Smitty there. He said that he was going to tell Bon all about what I wanted him to do. So we had a big fight about it, Smitty and I. We had an awful fight about it."

"Yeah," Flynn said. "And you went a little nuts. You got scared crazy—and you killed him. You stuck those big sharp scissors into him, didn't you, Aileen?"

She shook her head, violently. Her small, full mouth hung open, moist and loose. "No," she said, her voice climbing. "No, no, no! You can't say that. Stop saying that!"

"You'd even let your sister take the rap on it, too, wouldn't you, Aileen?" he kept needing her.

She began to shake all over and she put her hands up in front of her and clasped them, digging the nails into the palms. "Make him stop saying that, Jackson!" she screamed.

Jackson Marks bent and picked a cushion off a chair. He folded it carefully around the pistol, to deaden the sound. "He does

have a little too much to say," Marks admitted.

Ricky Flynn put his hand to the toothpick in his mouth and flicked it hard toward Marks. The little hardwood sliver spun straight toward the actor's eyes. He twisted his head and ducked a little to avoid it and Ricky Flynn went at him, low and sideways.

The gun went off with a muffled clap of sound. The two men rolled on the floor. Jackson Marks' superior weight told and he got on top of Flynn. But Ricky got hold of Marks' gun wrist, kept gripping it, twisting it, putting pressure from the ball of his thumb against Marks' pulse. It got to be a little too much and Jackson Marks screamed with pain, dropped the gun.

Before Flynn could grab it, though, Aileen O'Malley darted across the room and scooped the gun up from the floor. She leveled it at Ricky Flynn's head, the glassy shine of her eyes showing only through slit-lids, now, her teeth bared.

Just as she pulled the trigger, Flynn got leverage into his legs and free arm, rolled Marks between himself and the girl. He felt Marks' heavy body jerk once when the bullet entered the back of his head. Flynn rolled free of the now limp figure of the other man, scrambled to his feet. He went after Aileen before she could figure out what had happened. She was just starting to turn the gun toward him, when he knocked it flying out of her hand.

Slowly, she backed away from him, her face working, her eyes starting to wall back into her head. "The hell with you," she said shrilly. "I won't go to prison, you hear me. You won't get me!"

She spun around and raced for the opened window. Flynn didn't have a chance to stop her. He started after her and he shouted at her, but it was too late. She went out through the window like she was diving into surf. The echoing sound of her scream hung in the air for a moment, then cut off.

Weakly, Ricky Flynn moved toward the window, looked out and down. The window faced onto an alley. She was huddled down there on the pavement, seven flights below, all in a heap and very, very still.

Flynn didn't have too much trouble proving his story to Lieutenant Ganza. They
(Please continue on page 97)

THE FUTILE CORPSE

By LAWRENCE TREAT

IT WAS barely seven a.m. when the two detectives rang my bell. The dark, studious one introduced himself as Sergeant Eilers and his companion as Sergeant Bratt. Bratt was round and fatish and reminded me vaguely of Otis.

"Come in," I said. "I don't know what you want, but come in."

Bratt walked over to the window and remained standing there, but Eilers took the big red chair next to the fireplace. He put his feet on the footstool, leaned back and lit a cigarette. He started to deposit the smouldering match on the arm of the chair.

"Please!" I exclaimed. "Not there!"

"Sorry," said Eilers, holding the now dead match and rolling it between his fingers.

He looked like a scholar. His dark, almond-shaped eyes were meditative, as if he had just opened a book and was taking a final glance around before immersing himself in his studies. He appeared to have forgotten the match.

"We want to ask you a few questions," he said quietly. "We'd like you to help us. Do you know Otis Wilson?"

I nodded. "Yes. He's my best friend. Why?"

Eilers' fingers, a mere inch or two from the ash tray, kept playing with the match. "When did you see him last?" he asked, watching me.

"Yesterday. I had lunch with him." I blinked and corrected myself. "No, not yesterday. We usually have lunch together but yesterday we skipped it. Why do you ask? What's happened?"

"He was stabbed," said Eilers. "He's dead."

"Stabbed?" I exclaimed.

My shock was genuine and I had no need to act. I was a man whose closest friend had been murdered, and I had the privileges of a chief mourner.

"Where were you last night?" continued Eilers.

I was fascinated by the match. I kept staring at it, wanting him to drop it, hoping it would slip out of his fingers.

"Well?" he said.

I had to think of his last question. "Where was I last night?" I repeated jerkily. "I went to see Otis, at his store. That is, I started to. It was Thursday. He works on the books every Thursday night. I thought I'd drop in and see him. Look—he can't be dead."

Eilers studied me in complete silence. I lowered my eyes and pulled my bathrobe tighter around my chest.

"I was telling how I went to see him," I said. "I started to go and on my way down I remembered he had a meeting. He's on the board of the Better Business Bureau. He had a committee meeting and he wouldn't be at the store."

"How far did you get?"

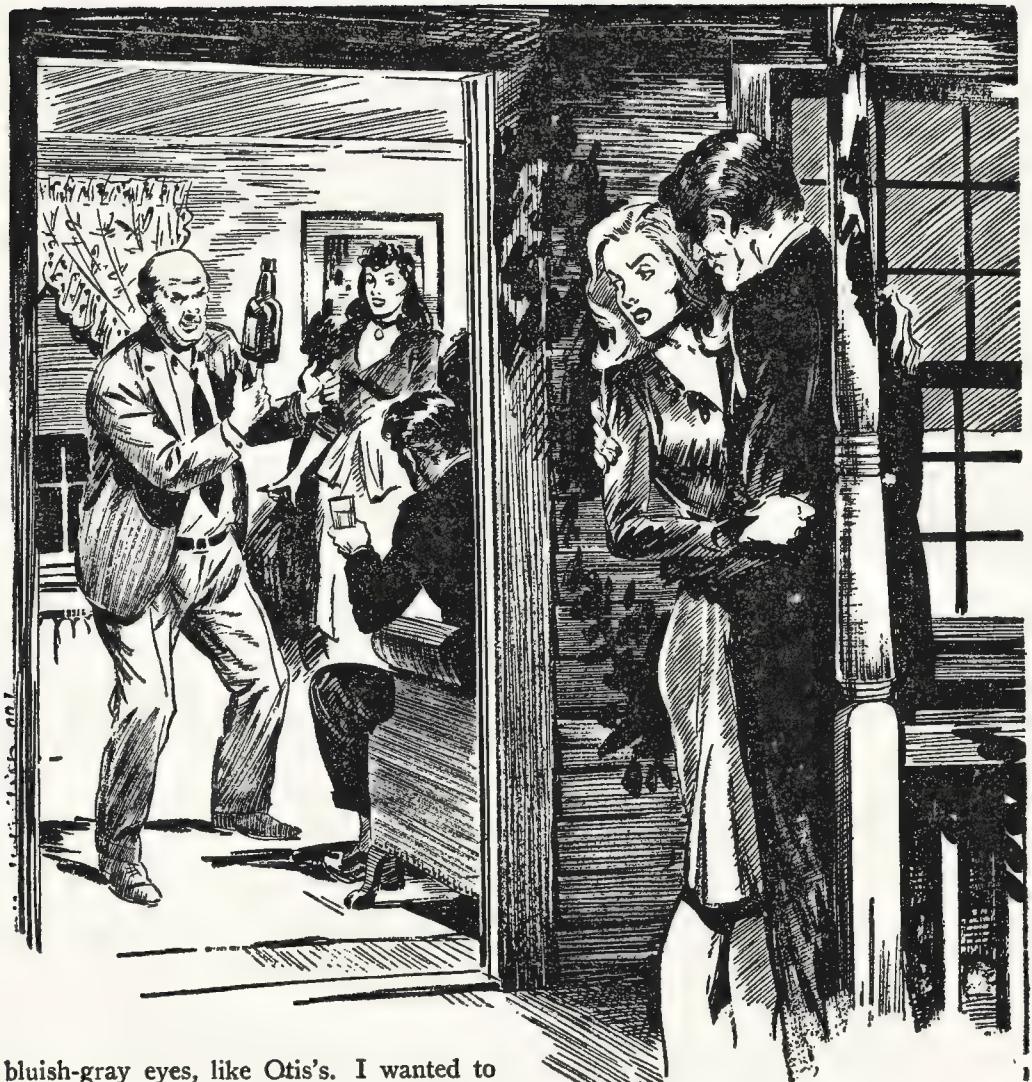
"I don't know. Maybe as far as Center Street. Maybe to Flower. I'm not sure. I remembered and then I went home."

"He was killed on Flower," said Eilers.

I gulped. I had a mad urge to yell and release my tension. They were too quiet. Bratt had left the window and was prowling around behind me. I could feel his eyes boring into the back of my head. Small,



The cheerful fool was fixed . . . with a fall-guy to take the rap—but the beautiful widow was slow in coming into my arms.



bluish-gray eyes, like Otis's. I wanted to yell and tell Bratt to stand where I could see him.

"What time did you reach Flower?" asked Eilers.

"I don't know. I can't think. Please—"

The match business made me jumpy. It was silly and it was what Eilers wanted, but I couldn't help myself.

"Please," I said shakily. "Will you put the match down?"

"Sure," said Eilers, dropping the match. "What time were you on Flower?"

"About nine or half-past."

"Was Wilson in the habit of carrying money with him?"

"Yes. Usually around a hundred dollars. He liked to be able to buy anything he saw

She whispered: "It would be like killing him."

★ ★ ★

that struck his fancy, and he liked to buy it on the spot, for cash."

Eilers reached for the match as if he were going to pick it up. Then he remembered, and he refrained. But it didn't bother me any more. I'd started to talk about Otis and I couldn't stop. The shock had loosened my tongue and I had to go on talking, telling about Otis and what I thought of him and what he'd meant to me.

"He was my best friend," I said. "We had shops next to each other for years. He had a haberdashery store and I had a jewelry place, and when I gave it up and went into the wholesale end, I took an office nearby and we had lunch every day. We went home together every evening and we took our vacations at the same time and went fishing, up at Lake Custer. He caught a big bass this summer and he had it mounted and put over the fireplace at Custer Lodge. They'll miss him. So will everybody. He was the most cheerful guy you ever met and the most generous, too. He was like a big kid."

"What did you want to see him about last night?"

"Money. I'd lent him five thousand dollars and I'd asked him to pay it back. Maybe I shouldn't be telling you this. Maybe I should shut up like a clam and not get myself in hot water, but I can't help it. Otis and I had an argument the day before yesterday. He couldn't imagine my asking for the money—so we had an argument. By last night I couldn't stand it any longer and I started down to his store to tell him never mind, he could keep it the rest of his life. Only then I remembered he wasn't there and I turned around and came home."

"He didn't go to that meeting," said Eilers. "It was called off. So he might have had five thousand dollars on him, but he certainly had a hundred or so. The only thing is, how did the robber know that?"

"What robber?"

"The one that killed him."

I said "Oh," and Eilers stood up.

"Well, thanks for your cooperation, Mr. Berwick," he remarked. "We'll want to see you again, of course, but we won't bother you any more right now."

"Bother?" I said. I wanted to be bothered. I wanted to tell them all about George and how George knew where Otis kept his revolver. But you don't stab a man with a revolver and Eilers and Bratt didn't seem to be interested in me any more. I let them out of the apartment and then I sat down in my big red chair and made myself not phone Kay Wilson. Because if I called Kay at seven-thirty a.m. on the morning her husband had been killed, it might look bad. For her.

You see, that first morning I didn't be-

lieve for a moment that Otis Wilson had been stabbed. He'd been shot, and I knew who had done it and why. Were the police fools, coming along with their tale of a stabbing? Weren't I and everybody else bound to read the true story in the newspapers?

I bought them all, on my way downtown. They said that Otis Wilson, owner of the Beau Brummel Haberdashery, had been stabbed in the chest and apparently robbed of a sum of money. He'd been killed on Flower Street, about three blocks from his store. It had happened last night, although his body had not been found until early this morning, when a milkman noticed it lying on the grass, just off the sidewalk, and had called the police.

How does a man get shot and then die of a stab wound?

Miss Millen, my secretary, greeted my by asking whether I'd heard the awful news. I said I had and that I didn't want to talk about it. I went into my office and slammed the door. When Miss Millen came in to take dictation, neither of us referred to Otis.

At about eleven o'clock, after I had finished my correspondence, I called Otis's store. George answered the phone and I said, "Hello? This is Frank Berwick speaking. I wondered whether you'd like to have lunch with me."

"Oh, thanks," said George eagerly. "Of course." Then the eagerness left his voice. "It's terrible, isn't it?" he said.

I cut him off sharply and he stammered an apology. But his eagerness came back when he said, "All right, I'll meet you at the restaurant." There was a short pause. "Like always," he said, and hung up.

I put the phone down and sat there for a long time, thinking. "Like always," George had said. Like Otis had always done. Otis met me at the same restaurant every single day of the year, and from now on it would be George. He'd be a little late, like Otis had always been, and he'd walk in breathlessly.

"Sorry I'm late," he'd say, "but I met somebody on the street and said hello."

Yes. The words would be the same, only it would be like George's voice instead of Otis's. I knew that. The only thing I didn't know was whether it was a motive for murder.

I had mentioned no time to George, but I reached the restaurant at twelve-thirty, in accordance with custom. I went to my regular table and sat down. At twelve-thirty-three George walked in. He was tall and lanky, but he moved like a short man as he tossed his hat to the girl. I couldn't hear what he said, nor did I need to. Otis always said, "Take good care of it—it's my best cap."

I saw George's lips move and then he came over and sat down. He didn't look at the menu. He shoved it aside and remarked, "I'll take the special."

"Funny thing," I said. "That's what Otis always said."

"I guess I've picked up a few of his habits," said George grudgingly. "You see, I admired him so."

"He was good to you, wasn't he?"

"Like a father. He gave me my first job and he taught me everything I know. He sent me to night school and he trained me to take over the business. At one time he even spoke of adopting me. Mr. Berwick—it's awful. To die that way, to be lying in the street all night while I—"

His bony face was like a wooden skeleton covered loosely with a skin of stained, yellowish cloth. Only his eyes, shiny and worried, seemed to have any semblance of life.

"While you what?" I asked tensely.

The light seemed to go out of his eyes. "While I didn't even know," he said.

I glanced around the restaurant. "Do you realize you were followed here?" I said. "The man over in the corner?"

"Me? What for?"

"The police must have picked up something to make them suspicious. They questioned you, didn't they?"

"Yes. I thought they'd never stop. They examined every inch of the store and office. I never saw so many police. They discovered that Otis had been working last night, at his desk on the balcony. He'd been working on inventory figures and the sheets were still spread out on his desk. He must have been interrupted."

"Nonsense," I said. "You know how he'd stop any kind of desk work right in the middle of it. Maybe he was interrupted and maybe he just got tired of arithmetic and got up and walked out."

"That's what I told the police, but they

didn't believe me. And yet, all they know is that he was there, that he left, got half-way to the bus stop and was attacked. But why did they ask me so many questions? Why do I need an alibi for last night? Don't they know how I loved him?"

"Keep telling them about it," I said. "Where were you?"

"At the movies," said George, sullenly. "Alone."

"He left you his business, didn't he?" I asked. And when George nodded, I said, "Well, that's reason enough to suspect you. The natural thing would have been to leave everything to Kay."

"But she wouldn't have carried on the business, like me. I'm going to make a tradition of his beliefs. I'm even going to keep his name on the sign. I want him to live on, in me."

"George" I said, "Otis was my closest friend. He came to me with all his troubles. I want you to do the same."

George's taut, bony face seemed to relax. "Thanks," he said. "I'll try to be worthy of it. Thank you—Frank."

I chewed savagely and grumbled some sort of a reply. Then I said, "Have you seen Kay?"

"Yes. I stopped there this morning. The police had already questioned her and she was nervous and upset. It was so sudden and terrible. But you know how things were between Otis and Kay."

I nodded. "Of all the people he knew, the only one who didn't respond to him was his own wife."

"Maybe that was why," said George hotly. "Maybe he gave too much to other people and not enough to her."

"In any case, I don't think he realized. He saw everything through rose-colored glasses. He simply couldn't conceive of anyone being selfish or mean or disloyal to him. Sometimes I wanted to shatter his illusions and make him grow up."

George stared at his hand and rubbed it along the table cloth. "He'd been gambling at the race track," he said in a low, nervous voice. "He'd lost a lot. That was why he couldn't pay you back."

"He didn't have to," I said. "I didn't really need it."

George brightened and looked up suddenly. He hoped I'd cancel the debt, but I had no intention of doing so. Not for him.

"If it were Kay," I added, "I wouldn't insist. But you own the store now, and this is business."

"I'll do my best," said George quietly. "But I'll need time."

"You can have all the time you want. I won't press you."

George gave me the kind of adoring glance that he used to reserve for Otis. I turned away and asked the waiter for a check.

I did no work that afternoon. I sat at my desk and tried to go over my books and couldn't. I, who can usually tally a column of numerals like an adding machine, had to count on my fingers and add like a school child. But I kept at it. I had to make the time pass until five, when I could take the bus uptown and visit Kay. Somehow, it seemed wrong that I should go sooner. I had been Otis's best friend and I had lived with the image of Kay in my mind, and yet I couldn't take a half hour off from business and see her on the day her husband had died. Don't ask me why. I just couldn't. It didn't seem the right thing to do, and I waited.

I wanted the police to come. I wanted the young, studious Eilers and his partner who reminded me of Otis to come in and sit down on the other side of my desk and ask questions. I'd have told everything, I think, if they'd come in. I'd have cleared my mind, wiped it clean, the way you wipe a dirty windshield with a clean, damp cloth.

But they didn't come. And after all, I told myself, what could I have said? Otis had been stabbed, and I knew nothing of that. Otis had been robbed, and I knew nothing of that, either. The passion and tension and the ugly, unnatural emotions that I knew so much about were irrelevant.

After a while, my fever left me. I pushed the ledger books aside and I tried to think coldly and logically. I would figure out a crime theory and I would bolster it with evidence. I would approach the problem objectively, and I would be infinitely more capable than the police because I had so much more to start with.

At five, I left the office.

The Wilson maid let me in and said Mrs. Wilson was in the living room. As I passed the hall table, I noticed George's hat, but he was not with Kay.

She was sitting near the fireplace and her

hands were crossed in her lap. Although it had been a hot day and the sun had warmed the whole room, she looked as if she were cold. She hardly raised her head.

This was a Kay I had never seen before. Not tall, statuesque and remote, overshadowing Otis so that he seemed no more than a cheerful cherub; but a sick woman hugging her grief.

"Hello, Kay," I said.

She didn't answer. She was frozen and hardened and dead. Her mellow, womanish quality, the inner strength to which we had all, in a measure, clung—it was gone.

I walked over to her, took her two hands and lifted them. She shuddered. I said, "Kay, look at me."

Obediently, she lifted her face. She had no make-up on. Her lips were pale, her gray eyes were tired. I felt a wave of pity, and at the same time I wondered why she was taking it so hard.

"Kay," I said, "I didn't expect this."

"Neither did I," she answered softly. "I thought it would be a release, but it isn't."

"Shock," I said. "Why don't you go away for a few days."

"Where?"

"To the mountains. To one of the resort places where you can rest up and relax."

"Alone?"

"I can't go with you—yet."

She didn't react. The mask that she'd worn for so long had set and congealed. Instead of being free, she was tighter and stiffer than ever. And out of her tightness and stiffness she squeezed a single sentence.

"Frank, I feel so guilty!"

"You?" I exclaimed, and for a long while we were both silent.

I remembered that evening only a few months ago. The Wilsons had been giving a party and the house was filled with noise and smoke and drunkenness when Kay and I went outside. The air was cool and the stars seemed thin, buoyant. I put my arm around her and suddenly she clung to me. Her rich, brittle veneer dissolved and she stepped down from her throne and became human for me for the first time. Her cheek was hot against mine.

She told me about Otis, how her marriage with him was a sham and a mockery, how he treated her like one of his customers—someone whose affection, once won, carried no deeper and required no further

effort of understanding. Otis's love, like his cheerfulness, had no capacity of development.

"Why don't you leave him, then?" I asked. "Why don't you get a divorce?"

"From Otis? He couldn't stand it." She whispered: "It would be like killing him." Then, with the words said and with the feel of each other mutually seeping into our bodies, we both said: "Why not?" We had chimed out the same question at the same time. Then we laughed lightly, as if we hadn't meant anything.

Well, it had happened. Otis had been killed and Kay was free and I owed no loyalty. But she had gone away from me.

I told myself it was the shock, it was the horror and finality. Give her a week, I reasoned. Give her a month, until her conscience was soothed and she felt safe and unharried.

"You know how I feel about you, Kay," I said. "If there's anything I can do for you—"

I let my meaning sink in. Kay blushed crimson. I kept staring at her, thinking one word. *Murderess*. I concentrated on it, trying to get used to the idea, wanting her to reach my thoughts in some dazzling feat of telepathic communication.

"Thank you," she said, "but I don't think you understand. Otis wasn't exactly romantic and maybe I wasn't always a good wife—"

She stopped there and blushed again. This time the communication existed and she knew my thoughts better than I did myself. She went on in a low voice.

"But there was still his goodness and his unselfishness, and now that he's gone—it hurts."

I could feel the heat of her and smell her fragrance. I wanted to grab her and tell her it was all right, that anything she did or wanted, ever, under any circumstances, was okay with me.

Then George entered the room. The look he gave me was pure hate and I backed away quickly.

"George is here," I said. "I'd better go."

Outside, Sergeants Eilers and Bratt were sitting in a car. I walked over and said hello and they opened the rear door and invited me to sit down. I did.

"How's Mrs. Wilson?" asked Eilers.

"Not too well," I answered. "She's tired

and upset and nervous. George is in there."

Eilers pushed his light gray hat back on his head. Bratt did the same thing. I had the queer sensation that Bratt was Otis and that Otis was sitting in on the investigation of his own murder. He would have loved that.

"Otis had a gun," I said suddenly. "Did you find it?"

"We know he had one," said Eilers. "We checked on the permit. But we don't think he was carrying any gun."

"Did you find it?" I asked again.

Eilers lit a cigarette, blew out the match and placed it, still smoking, on the upholstered back of the seat.

"No," he said. "George told us where to look, but the gun wasn't there."

"Have you noticed anything peculiar about George?" I said.

"Peculiar?" repeated Eilers.

"I guess it wouldn't mean anything to you, but I had lunch with him. He came to Otis's table and he ate what Otis would have eaten and ordered two cups of coffee and barely touched the second one, the way Otis always did."

"What of it?"

"I don't know," I said. "That's what worries me. George always imitated Otis. Said the same things and wore the same clothes and had the same thoughts. George was nothing, you see. No family, no background. Otis made him and became his ideal. From wanting to be like Otis, to being Otis—is that a big step?"

"How could he get to be Otis?" asked Eilers.

"By killing," I said.

There was a lengthy silence. Then Bratt said, "This robber who did the knifing—we think we got a line on him."

When I got home, there was a package waiting for me. It was small but rather heavy, and it was wrapped in a brown bag and tied loosely with string. The bag had a few figures scrawled on it, as if a grocer had done his addition on it and then handed it to his customer. But I knew it no longer contained groceries. The small, heavy object could be only one thing. A gun.

Otis's gun.

It was easy to identify because it had his initials engraved on the right hand stock.

I called the superintendent and asked him who had brought the bag. He said he

didn't know. He'd found it in front of the door and had put it inside my apartment.

I sat down in the red chair and tried to figure out who had brought it here and why. There was no reason, no possible answer. Otis had been shot with this gun and the police insisted he'd been stabbed. The gun had been thrown away and somebody had brought it here, to me.

I broke it open. The six chambers were empty.

I put the gun on a table and walked over to the mirror. I looked at myself. What had happened between Kay and me had been brief and no one in the world knew about it save the two of us. Kay would not and could not tell the police.

"George did it," I said.

I stared for a long time. Then I amended my statement. "George must have done it," I said. "He claimed he'd been at the movies last night, but he wasn't. He was with Otis. I saw the two of them near Flower Street and they seemed to be quarreling. I didn't want to interfere. I turned and walked away.

"Why didn't I mention this before? Because I didn't want to make trouble for George. I couldn't think of him as a murderer, and certainly not as Otis's murderer. But now I'm sure."

I repeated all I'd said so that I'd have it firmly in mind, and then I thought of the additional questions that would be put. I asked them of myself and I answered them, aloud, gazing into the mirror.

I smiled. Then I turned away from the mirror, picked up the revolver and went out. I got a taxi and told the driver to take me to police headquarters. There, I asked to see Sergeant Eilers or Bratt.

They were both in. They received me in a bare room with nothing in it except three desks, a row of filing cabinets and a few chairs.

I put the gun on the desk. "I found this in my apartment when I got home," I said. "It's Otis Wilson's gun. You can tell that from the initials."

Bratt picked it up. Eilers said, "Why would anybody bring it to you?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I found it and I thought I ought to bring it here and tell you."

"Thanks," said Eilers.

"I don't understand it," I said. "Tell

me—has the autopsy been performed yet?"

"Yes," said Eilers.

"What did it show?"

"It showed the stab wound, of course. Don't worry, Mr. Berwick. I told you we had a line on the man who did it, and we'll get him."

"How?"

"We have ways," said Eilers. His dark eyes looked angry.

I stood up. "Is there anything else I can do?" I asked.

George. I thought of my rehearsal in front of the mirror. This was the time and place. Nobody except George could have obtained the gun and this was the time to mention it.

"Nothing I know of," said Eilers.

"All right," I said.

I went out.

The funeral next day was a big one. It was exactly what Otis would have liked. It was held in a church and about five hundred people were there. All his clubs were represented. When it was all over, George and I took Kay home to her big, empty house.

Kay's condition worried me. Now that Otis was no longer there, she should have come to me. She knew I loved her, that I wanted her regardless of consequences. She should have remembered those few moments under the stars, how we had spoken of Otis's death, said "Why not?" and then laughed. Both of us. Brief though it had been, could she forget?

In the evening I wrote a long letter, to myself. I sealed it with wax and then I called George and asked him to come over. He spent about an hour with me. We talked about Otis and how good he'd been.

The next morning I took my sealed envelope down to the office and gave it to my secretary.

"Will you send that, registered?" I asked.

She glanced at it and said, "But, Mr. Berwick—it's addressed to you."

"Exactly," I answered. "There's nothing like the United States post office to prove the date."

She smiled as if she had never before quite realized how smart I was, and she went out with the letter.

When I had lunch with George, I spoke about Kay.

"I'm worried," I said. "She seems to have lost her spirit. She acts as if life held nothing for her."

"It doesn't," said George. "A man like Otis—how can she forget?"

"People get over everything," I answered. "Apparently the shock was too much for her. The question is how to bring her out of her present state."

"You don't know what happened," he said. "She'll never get over it."

"I think I have a way," I said. "If shock caused it, then a second shock may snap her out of it."

"Nothing can be as bad as Otis's death."

"Perhaps," I remarked. "We'll see."

This time, I didn't wait until evening to visit Kay. I went there straight from the restaurant. I had to do it now, the timing had to be right, so that there could be no question or possibility of my tampering with that envelope.

Kay received me upstairs, in her bedroom. She still kept her eyes averted and her hands were still cold and unresponsive when I lifted them.

"Kay," I said. "You know I love you, don't you? Ever since that night of the party, the only thing that has mattered has been you."

"You shouldn't speak like that. Not now. Not so soon afterwards."

"I have to say it now. There's a connection, Kay."

"What?" she asked.

I looked at her. I could see the faint stirring of her curiosity, but then she turned away from me.

"I killed him," I said.

That did it. She swung around swiftly. There was horror in her expression, but she had come to life at last. I didn't care how or what had restored her. The only thing that counted was Kay herself, that she was animated and mistress of herself. Even if she looked at me with loathing, at least she looked.

"I want to tell you," I said, "because you're part of it, too. Ever since we both said 'Why not'. Remember?"

"I didn't mean it. It was a joke. I didn't know what I was talking about. You're not serious, are you, Frank? You're just talking. I don't believe a word of it."

She didn't want to believe; she was draw-

ing within herself again and I had to keep hammering at her.

I laughed. "I dropped in at the store Thursday night," I said. "Otis opened the door and took me up to his office, on the balcony. He was alone and he was delighted to see me. You know how he hated paper work. He said I'd rescued him and he wanted to go out and have a drink. I refused. And then, Darling, I told him—about us."

"By what right—" began Kay. But I smiled and went on talking.

"At first he didn't believe it. But when he finally realized I meant every word, he lost his temper and made a pass at me. I knew where he kept his gun. I was scared, Kay. I'd never seen him like that. I grabbed the gun and I fired."

"But he was stabbed, wasn't he?"

"That's what bothered me. That's what's been worrying me ever since. I shot him in his office, and the police say he was stabbed at a point three blocks away."

"Maybe you missed."

"I didn't miss. I was three feet away from him. I couldn't miss. Besides, the force of the bullet knocked him over and he fell. His suit caught on that splinter on the back of his desk chair and I even heard the cloth rip. Then I turned and ran. I threw the gun away in a garbage pail. Do you believe me now?"

She stood up. Her cheeks had patches of color and her eyes were bright and feverish. "Frank," she said in a half-whisper. "Please go. And I don't want to see you again, ever."

I turned slowly. In two hours she'd be calm and self-possessed and filled with admiration for me. In two hours we'd take up where we'd left off those few months ago. She'd laugh and she'd say she was sorry and hadn't meant a word she'd said.

Still, it was hard to take. There was so much of emotion in her, so much of fear and ferocity that for a moment I had misgivings. Love and hate are too strong to play around with. Emotions, once loosed, have a habit of going their own way.

I went out of the room—and saw Eilers and Bratt. Eilers closed the door.

"You're under arrest," said Eilers. "For the murder of Otis Wilson."

"You're insane!" I exclaimed.

"Little matter of a dictograph," said

Eilers. "We knew you'd tell Mrs. Wilson eventually. We had her working on you. We heard every word you just said."

I laughed sharply. "Every word was a lie. How could I have shot him, when he wasn't shot? He was stabbed, wasn't he?"

"He was shot. According to the autopsy, the bullet entered the left ventricle of his heart and the thick muscle contracted and prevented bleeding for a few minutes. He left his office and started to go home. He went about three blocks and then collapsed. Later, somebody robbed the corpse and we have the guy in jail right now.

"But it so happened that Wilson fell on a spike and the first report we had said he'd been stabbed. We figured it might be a good idea to let the story go uncontradicted. We figured we didn't have much evidence on you and that a war of nerves would help. Like sending you the gun, after a garbage collector had found it and turned it in."

"You're making a bad mistake," I said.

"There's no mistake," said Eilers. "We figured it was you ever since we first told you about it and you picked up the word *stabbed*. Remember? You weren't surprised to hear that Wilson was dead, but to hear he'd been stabbed—that got you."

"I know who killed Otis," I said, "and I put my evidence down in writing. I was afraid of something like this and I wrote down my reason for pretending to confess. I wanted to shock Mrs. Wilson out of her lethargy. There should be a registered letter stating all this and the letter will be postmarked early this morning, long before I spoke to Mrs. Wilson. Will that be sufficient to neutralize my confession?"

"It will show you wrote it last night and it will show you're smart," said Eilers. "But nothing in the world can explain away the facts that you knew he was shot close up, and that you knew he tore his suit on the chair as he fell."

"Hadn't you better see the letter, first?" I said.

"Come on," Bratt said.

Except for the time of day, it was like the other morning when they'd come and told me Otis was dead. Eilers sat in the big red chair and put his feet on the footstool. He took out a cigarette and a packet of matches. I sat opposite him and Bratt wandered silently around the room. I felt his small bluish eyes, so like Otis's eyes, boring into me.

I felt I had won. I watched Eilers open the registered envelope and read the contents. Everything was there, fool-proof. He read slowly and carefully and I could see he was impressed.

When he'd finished, he nodded to Bratt and handed him the letter.

"According to this," said Eilers, "you heard all the details last night, from George. You state you intend to use those details and to tell Mrs. Wilson you are the murderer, although you are not, and that your lie will be for the sole purpose of psychological shock. George, you write, may deny his confession, but you insist you saw him with Wilson on the night of the murder and that George's alibi of going to the movies is false."

Eilers glanced up. His dark eyes were thoughtful. He frowned and said, "You have a nice point there, Berwick. Because we investigated George and we know he never went to the movies. You're right. The only difference is, we know where he was and you don't."

"He was with Otis," I said.

Eilers shook his head. "With Otis's wife," he said. "Every Thursday."

He lit his cigarette, blew out the match and started to place it, still smouldering, on the arm of the red chair.

I jerked forward and snapped "Don't—" Then I bit my lips and didn't finish the sentence. After all, what was the use?

ONCE A SUCKER . . .

George Washington Parker, recognized by many as the foremost conman in all history, once escaped a jail term by taking over his own defense in court. In cross-examining his accuser, on whom he'd unloaded some worthless mining stock, Parker managed to prove that, years before, he had sold the same gent the Brooklyn Bridge.

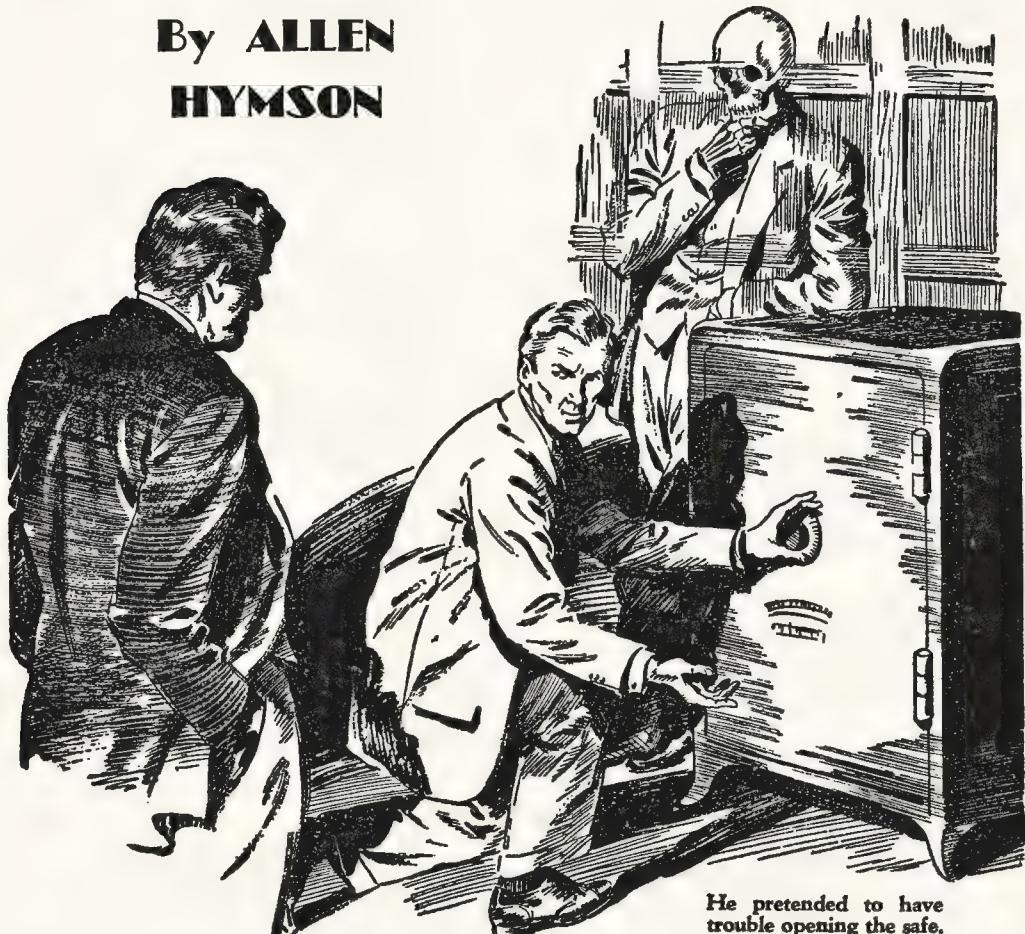
The charges were dropped.

—EJ

The cemeteries are open every day for people who make. . . .

A GRAVE MISTAKE

By ALLEN
HYMSON



He pretended to have trouble opening the safe.

THE small lead box in his pocket weighed him down far beyond its intrinsic weight. It seemed to encompass him, mind and spirit, as he stood in the center of his room and listened.

In the bathroom, Gil Austin yodeled like an addled Swiss under the shower. He had everything in the world to be happy about, Stan Bigger remarked bitterly. He was young, healthy, good looking. He had just been promoted by his firm to a twenty-five thousand dollar a year job managing the southern branch, where he would be practically his own boss. He was going to marry *the girl—their girl*, Ellen Martin.

It had started, he recalled, when they were kids together back in the small town of Willows—Gil, Ellen and Stan. Their fathers were rice farmers. The families were fast friends as well as neighbors. They used each other's machinery, helped farm their lands and gathered on the holidays like one family. The three children met at the road fork every school day and rode their ponies into town a scant five miles away.

The townspeople, he recalled, thought it was wonderful the way he was never jealous because Gil was always tops in anything he set out to do. Gil took all the

prizes at school, at the junior rodeo, in athletics, and graduated president of their class at elementary, high school, and finally college.

"Why, Stan worships the very ground Gil walks on," he had overheard his own mother saying, and thought he detected a shade of resentment that it could not have been the other way round.

The town told and retold the story of how Stan even risked his life to save Gil when they were hunting. They had left their guns to gather wood for the fire over which Ellen was cooking wienies, when a mountain lion with cub attacked Gil. No one ever suspected Stan risked his life only to prove to Ellen he was the better man, nor that his hesitation almost cost Gil's life when the animal tore Gil's throat.

Stan always felt though that was why Ellen leaned just a shade toward him. He had been able to stand by and listen to everybody sing Gil's praises as long as Ellen favored him even just a shade. But this new honor—the twenty-five thousand dollar a year job—had swung the balance. She and Gil were to be married before the end of the year. That must not happen.

The shower and yodeling stopped abruptly. The door opened and Gil stuck his tousled wet head out, water dripping from his chin.

"My shirt's pretty soiled at the cuffs. Sent all of mine off in the trunk. Might lay out one of yours for me if you've the time," Gil suggested, grinning good-naturedly. Then he looked closer at his friend and sobered. "Hey, I'm not going that far," he protested. "I'll fly back week-ends. Then when Ellen and I are married, you can take to the planes and visit us."

Stan turned away and fussed in the bureau drawer, getting a shirt. He heard Gil shut the bathroom door again and the sounds of vigorous rub-down.

The picture of him visiting Gil and Ellen happily married dissipated Stan's last scruple. He went to the closet.

Gil had sent his trunk earlier that day. Gil's side of the closet looked empty with just the one gray suit hanging there which he was going to wear tonight.

Stan took the lead box from his pocket. This night, the grim thought came to him, the capsule inside, meant for the advance of science, held death. Each evening it was

brought to him by the workmen, to be deposited in a much thicker lead container in the company safe overnight. The half-inch capsule, containing radium, was used at the plant in taking pictures which would show up flaws in metal castings or weldings. Three or four hours exposure to it without protection meant death to any living thing within a year. A horrible lingering death, while the bones in one rotted away. There was no cure, absolutely no hope.

Quickly he removed the capsule from the lead box and dropped it inside the little pocket which Gil always had tailored into his regular suit-pocket to hold his lucky piece. His lucky piece was his dog tag which had stopped a bullet during the last war. Gil was superstitious about it and never went anywhere without it.

Stan's fingertips tingled, though he knew it was merely nerves. Gil would feel nothing, guess nothing till months from now when he would find it necessary to consult a doctor. And since there were various diseases which caused the same process of bone disintegration, no one would be likely to suspect Gil died of other than natural causes of which medical science is still ignorant.

He hid the empty box way back on the closet shelf and tapped a tattoo on the bathroom door, calling: "The shirt's on your bed. Wake me when you leave tomorrow morning."

"Too early. Wait a minute."

"Got to get moving to make my date. Wake me."

"Hey, wait!"

But Stan hurried out.

IT WAS after two when Stan let himself in with his key. The bedclothes outlined Gil's figure. "Awake?" Stan whispered.

He was deeply relieved when Gil merely grunted breathily, turned over and continued sleeping. Now he could remove the capsule to the safety of its larger lead jacket, which he had brought along in the luggage compartment of the car garaged down-stairs.

Stan closed his closet door softly before he pulled the light cord. He plunged his hand into Gil's lucky-piece pocket. His breath choked in his throat.

The capsule was not there—only the lucky piece.

He felt in the main pocket. Nothing. He almost tore the lining of the coat searching it so hastily. Still he could not find the capsule.

Fear struck deeper and deeper as Stan undressed. Unbelievingly, he stopped and performed the search all over again. Gil, he figured, must have had some reason to show his lucky piece and found the capsule. Not knowing what it was, he might well have thrown it away. Or, somehow it had slipped out of his pocket.

This left Stan in a terrible jam. He was responsible for the capsule. It was worth sixty-five hundred dollars, and almost unobtainable. What explanation could he give when the boss started asking him about it?

He pondered the hopeless question for hours, until he fell asleep.

When Stan woke, Gil was gone. Stan looked for a note but found none. He searched the floor and closet hopefully, but failed to uncover the capsule. The blue suit he had worn yesterday seemed like a distasteful reminder. He changed to his gray suit.

That morning he pretended to have trouble opening the safe. He told the boss the expert from the safe company could not get there till afternoon. Meantime, his brain turned and twisted over the hopeless

problem. With each hour his fear and despair grew and he realized the enormity and danger of the thing he had undertaken.

Just after two his phone rang. It had been ringing all day, it seemed. He snatched it up, short-tempered, and barked shortly: "Yes?"

"Long distance," the girl at the switchboard said. "Here's your party."

"Hello," Gil's deep voice came over the wire.

Stan tried to sound natural, praying he would be able to get a clue from him. "Why didn't you wake me?" he asked, forcing a light tone.

"Didn't have the heart. Say, Ellen decided to make our last night a real celebration so I helped myself to your tux. Came across a queer metal capsule in my own pocket. Must belong to you. Guess you thought you were dropping it in your own gray suit."

"What did you do with it?" he demanded tensely, cautiously.

"Put it in your gray suit, of course," Gil said.

Stan dropped the receiver. He seemed to have no control over his own muscles. It was as if some detached hand reached into his pocket.

He stared hopelessly at the capsule which dropped from his nerveless fingers onto the desk blotter.

IF I SHOULD DIE . . .



In that lonely, clouded world of lost memories, Donna Haydon waited for the word that would either tear apart the brooding, nightmare fabric of her life, or damn her forever as a ghostly, sleepy-time slayer!

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READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name, if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.

Kiss the Eggs Good-By

Dear Sir:

The rural district is a favorite place for the sharker to work. I thought I could recognize one in the form of a linoleum agent or picture salesman, and was always on my guard, but there are always new ways of working.

My husband was loading eggs in the car for a trip into town. It was harvest time and he needed the car badly to haul the grain from the combine, but the eggs had to be sold twice a week.

Just as he finished loading them, a late model pick-up truck drove into the yard, laden with egg crates.

The pleasant driver got out, introduced himself and told us he was representing a large poultry and egg company that was near us. He was making our community twice a week, he said, and as an introductory offer, his company was allowing him to pay two cents above the market.

It sounded legitimate enough. The firm he mentioned was well known to us, so without asking for his credentials, we loaded the crates from our car to his pick-up. He gave us a check and assured us he would be back the last of the week.

My husband stayed busy in the grain harvest and didn't go into town for a few days. One of our neighbors who also sold his eggs told my husband of having tried to cash his check and failed. They compared checks and saw they had different signatures.

After inquiries in the neighborhood, we found each check had a different signature and the bank, of course, would not cash one of them.

The pleasant young man was gone, perhaps many hundred miles by that time. And farmers like ourselves and the half-blind old merchant at the village store, whose eggs he took also, were his victims.

J. Z.
Abilene, Texas

Nickel Nabber

Dear Sir:

About a month ago I went into a phone booth to make a call. I deposited a nickel and dialed my number. The line was busy, so I hung up. I waited a moment for my nickel to drop, but it didn't.

Later on I went to another booth and deposited a nickel and dialed my number. This time there

was no answer. I hung up and waited for my nickel to drop. Again it didn't. I put my finger in the coin chute and discovered that there was a tin plate blocking any nickels from dropping. I removed it and fourteen nickels immediately dropped out.

Lately a man has been arrested on this charge in this vicinity. He was making money from all the busy phone booths in the city. He would go around every few days, remove the nickels and place the small tin plate back in the receiving chute. His earnings would run high, as there are lots of pay phones. So now if the coin doesn't drop, I examine very closely with my finger.

Sincerely yours,
W. H.
Dundas, Ont., Canada

Slick—But Not Shiny

Dear Sir:

A woman alone is often hard put to it to get work done around the place. And so, when I answered the bell and a smiling little man asked politely if he might wash and polish my car for me, I was delighted. I was more than willing to pay the \$7.50 he asked, although I thought it high. However, the car was in very bad condition. I asked if he had materials with him, and he said he did, indicating a small satchel in his hand.

It was around four in the afternoon of a dull day, so I put him right to work before it grew too dark. In no time at all he reported smilingly that the work was done. When I inspected the car, it looked all right, at least in the gloomy light. I paid him and off he went. I thought only that he was certainly a speedy, efficient worker.

In the morning, alas, when I looked at the car, I discovered it was a mess. He had wiped off the dust, all right, and apparently used a small amount of polish he had with him. But without asking, he had applied a coating of thick floor varnish he'd seen in the garage.

It took a reputable service man hours and hours to get the sticky mass off the car, and with it went most of the original polish. And it cost me plenty more, too. I found out later that the little man had done the same thing all over the neighborhood, working fast and apparently doing a good job on the side of the cars visible. He had no materials of his own in the little satchel, or at least very little, and apparently gambled that he'd find something around. We

figured that in one day he'd made over \$65 in our block alone.

Lucy Schurmer Lenden
Oakland, Calif.

Roaming Radios

Dear Sir:

While convalescing at a hospital, I made the acquaintance of a nurse, who related to me this story of a smooth character.

One afternoon an industrious-looking man entered the hospital lobby and calmly proceeded to disconnect a cabinet radio. When several attendants questioned his action, they were quickly and quite convincingly informed that he had been ordered to pick up the radio and change its wave length. So without further interference, he was allowed to walk away with the radio.

It was soon learned that the man was a thief. The police located and recovered the radio at a small shop where it had been sold for \$55 to an unsuspecting proprietor.

Nearby towns reported thefts that were identical even to the thief's description. He used the same tactics, except that in a few places he demanded and received \$5 in advance for the job of changing the radio's wave length.

William Gilmore
Columbus, Ohio

Milking the Gullible

Dear Sir:

One afternoon about four months ago my wife called me at work. She just had to tell me about the wonderful housing plan she had subscribed to that morning. Unfortunately, she had already given the fellow a ten-dollar deposit before she called me.

This is how the so-called plan worked. For twenty-five dollars we became full participating members in a building service. First we were to receive a huge home-building scrap book. My wife said the one he had was a leather-bound honey. Then every week we were to receive the latest building news, hints, etc. But this is what gave me that "Help Officer, I've been swindled" feeling. When we did decide to build, we were to get all lumber, hardware, etc. at a 20% discount. The minute she said that, I kissed the ten spot good-by.

On the off chance that it might be on the level, I called the Better Business Bureau. Naturally they had never heard of it. I laid off work the next day in the hope that he would come back for the fifteen dollar balance. He didn't.

I suppose he is milking the gullible clear across the country by now because they never caught him around here.

The only thing I have to be thankful for is the fact that I carry the bulk of the family money. Otherwise she might have given him the full twenty-five.

Yours truly,
Daniel F. Lindsay
Manitou Springs, Colo.

Bug in a Rug

Dear Sir:

A racket was worked upon a friend of mine

not so long ago by a glib-talking salesman who called about six o'clock one evening. He explained that he had a very excellent oriental rug in his car that he could let my friend have for next to nothing if he could take it right away. The salesman explained that he had sold another such rug to a very good mutual friend of them both. (He had). He further stated that he was helping to dispose of a stock of surplus rugs that had belonged to a concern whose lease had expired. (He gave the name of a concern in a nearby town whose name was known to my friend.) A very few persons were being let in on the sale of these rugs—"a selected few who knew and appreciated good rugs." My friend was one of the selected few.

To make a long story short, the rug looked fine, the price was ridiculously low, and the salesman was very convincing. My friend bought. The color in the rug began to fade in a month, and before three months had passed it had practically fallen apart. Needless to say, the man had never been heard of by the concern named (who were not going out of business) and the fly-by-night salesman has never been seen around those parts since.

Where he got his sucker list still remains his secret.

M. W. Sylvester
Brentwood, Md.

Cute Kid

Dear Sir:

Here's a cute little racket that is being pulled in our neighborhood. I know—I fell for it last night.

But good!

A young boy rang the doorbell and said someone was wanted on the phone at the corner store. He waited while I went back inside for my coat, and as is customary, I gave him a nickel before walking to the corner. Yep! No phone call! No nickel! No boy! From now on I'm making sure there is a phone call before I pass out any more nickels.

E. J. Pater
Philadelphia, Pa.

Quite a Party

Dear Sir:

A fellow pulled up at a filling station in a new car the day before New Years Day, holding his arm out of the window with a new watch on it. He explained to the attendant that he had to be at some distant town in time for a party that night, and had discovered that he hadn't taken enough money with him. Would the attendant please lend him \$20.00 on this new watch he had received as a Christmas present? On his way back he would stop and pick up his watch and repay the loan. Only he never returned. The watch was appraised at \$9.75. Imagine the profit in ten or fifteen stops along the road on a two-hour drive.

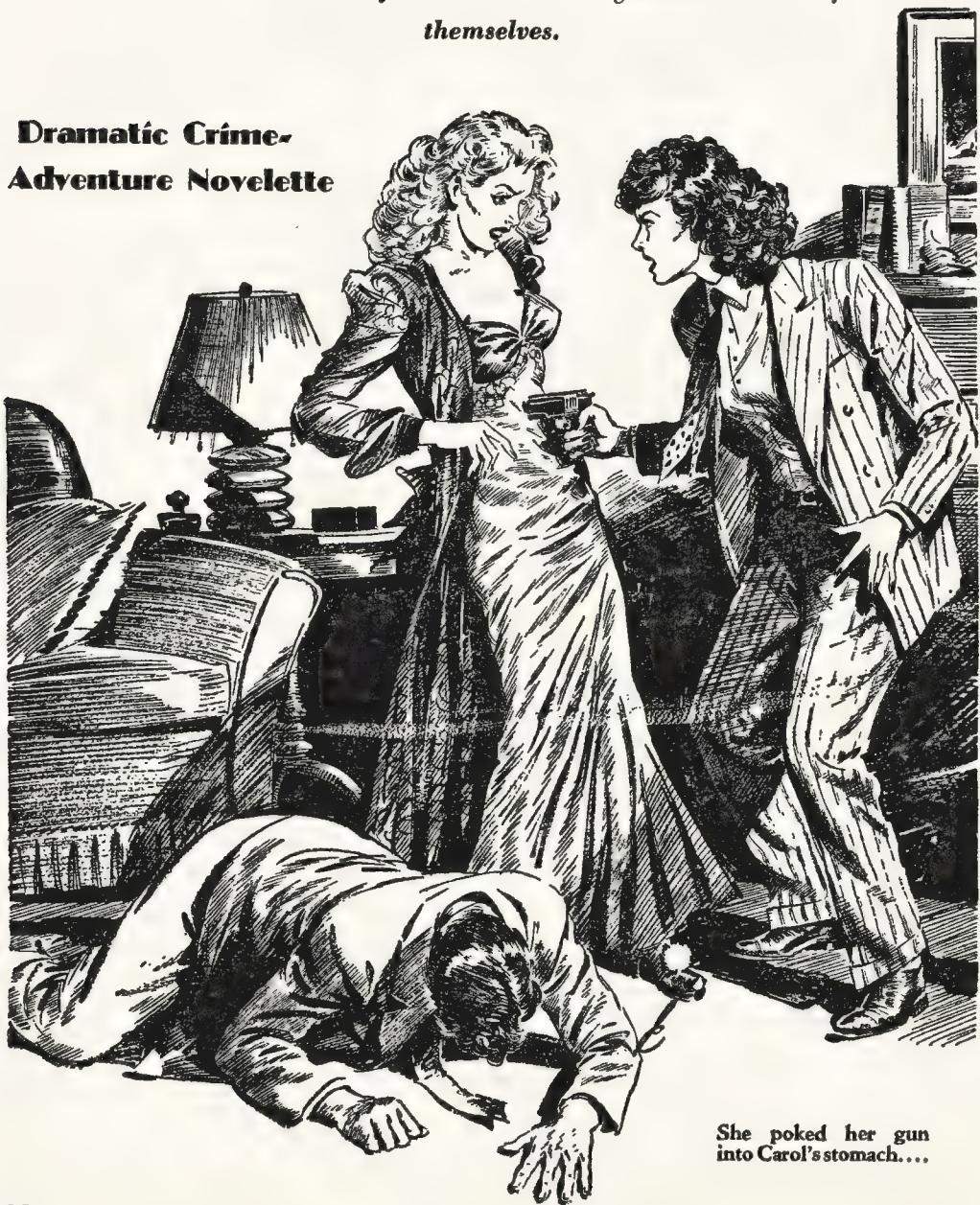
He must have had some party!

W. C. Shaw
Okauchee, Wis.

HOUSE

Jerry Duhan, cynical private eye, went to the fabulous Macomber mansion to unmask a glamorous French heiress—and learned just how French gals take care of themselves.

**Dramatic Crime-
Adventure Novelette**



*She poked her gun
into Carol's stomach....*

OF HOMICIDE

By PHILIP KETCHUM



CHAPTER ONE

Glamour with a Gun

SHE was gorgeous. Almost everything about her was just right. The gray suit she was wearing fitted her to perfection. When she crossed her knees, her skirt slid up just enough to draw a man's eye. Her hat might have looked ridiculous in a window but it gave a rakish, impudent touch to her appearance. The veil helped, but it couldn't altogether hide the cool appraisal of her eyes. That was what I didn't like. Her eyes. They were blue, steady; and the hint of cruelty was in them. Maybe on the beach on a moonlight night they could be warm and sparkling, but this wasn't the beach of a moonlight night. This was the office of the Duhan Detective Agency on a rainy afternoon.

I looked at the card on my desk. It read: *Carol Macomber*. I leaned back and looked at Carol Macomber. I smiled but didn't say anything. I never make it easy for a client at the beginning of an interview. I leave the entire burden of starting to talk on the shoulders of whoever comes through the door. It's a trick which sometimes gives you a good slant on the temperament and character of the other person. It paid off this time in a way I wasn't expecting. Carol Macomber reached suddenly into her purse, drew out her hand and leveled a short-barreled gun straight at me.

"I want to know why your men are following me," she said bluntly. "I want the truth and I want it right now."

A chill ran over my body. I sucked in a quick, sharp breath. The girl's voice hadn't sounded hysterical and I was glad of that, but the gun in her hand was very real. My mind did mental gymnastics trying to tie this girl up with any of the cases I had recently worked on, but it was no soap.

"Put the pop-gun away, Sister," I heard my voice saying. "I'm allergic to bullets."

"Then tell me who hired you to have me followed," snapped the girl.

I shook my head. "No one."

"You're lying."

"Not to you, Beautiful."

The girl's lips tightened. They were nice lips. She said: "Don't call me 'beautiful,' and don't call me 'sister.' I'm Mrs. Macomber."

"You'll be just a number in a cell if you don't put that gun away," I said grimly.

Carol Macomber looked at the gun in her hand. She didn't put it away. She was a blonde. She was maybe twenty-five or thirty; sometimes it's hard to tell. There was a slight frown on her forehead.

"I'll pay for it," she said suddenly. "I'll pay for the information I want."

I shook my head. "You won't pay me. I don't have it, either for money or bullets. Why not be a good girl and put the gun away?"

Carol looked at the gun again. She shrugged her shoulders. She put the gun back in her purse, but she kept watching me as though she expected me to jump.

"I wouldn't have used it," she said slowly. "And it might have worked. You might have told me."

"I might be able to find out for you," I countered. "Of course, I'd have to know more about you than I know now."

The girl bit her lips. "It might have been my husband," she said reflectively, "or it might have been Harry Macomber, my brother-in-law. It might have been Paul Garrett. It might even have been all of them. Sometimes I think they are all in on it together."

I said: "In on what?"

"In on proving that she's John's daughter. They want to throw me out. I don't intend to be thrown out."

"Why not begin all over again?" I suggested. "None of that means anything to me yet. Start out by telling me who Carol Macomber is."

"I said I was Mrs. Macomber. Mrs. John Macomber."

She straightened a little as she said that. She lifted her eyebrows. And that was enough. I got in. The Macombers were Southwest Steel. There were two brothers, John and Harry. They had money, the

kind you read about; and social position, the kind you don't. John Macomber had once been pointed out to me. As I recalled him he was short, stocky, about fifty, a man with black hair and a small mustache. I had never seen Harry.

"Go on," I suggested. "You've just started."

Carol bit her lips. She looked straight at me. "I don't know whether to trust you or not. I've heard about private detectives."

"And I've heard about attractive young girls," I answered, "who married much older men for their money."

THAT got her. It brought her to her feet, a flush of anger showing in her face. She opened her purse and reached into it again, but I came out of my chair and around the desk and twisted the gun from her hand before she could use it. It was a .32, bright, new and ugly. I dropped it into my pocket.

"A gun isn't a toy, you know," I said flatly. "Shall we go on or do you want to call it off?"

Carol Macomber had backed over to the wall. "I didn't marry John for his money," she said stiffly. "I don't intend to stay here and be insulted."

I shrugged my shoulders. "All right, it was true love, but maybe he's having you followed. Why?"

"Because of her. Madeline. The girl who claims she's his daughter."

"And she's not?"

"Of course she's not."

"Then who is she?"

"I—I don't know, Mr. Duhan. I'm a little frightened. That's why I bought the gun. I didn't buy it just to bring here. Do you think you could help me?"

This sounded natural. This sounded real. There was an almost appealing look in the girl's face. I walked back behind my desk and sat down and pointed to the chair where she had been sitting.

"For a third time," I suggested, "let's start all over. Sit down and tell me about Madeline and why she claims to be John Macomber's daughter and how you know she isn't."

Carol moved back to the chair and sat down. This time she didn't cross her knees. "I—I suppose I can tell you," she decided. "It'll all be in the papers pretty soon, any-

how. She'll be accepted as his daughter, but she isn't his daughter. I know she isn't."

I offered Carol a cigarette. She shook her head. I lit one myself and leaned back and waited for her to go on.

"It's a perfectly impossible story," she insisted. "Twenty years ago John was in France. He thought he wanted to be an artist. He spent three years there. He came back after the crash in '29. I knew that, of course. He's told me many times of those years in Paris, but he didn't tell me or anyone that he had been married while he was there. And I don't believe he was, in spite of what he says now."

"What does he say now?" I asked.

"He says he was married in 1927, that he and his wife had a daughter. He says that he sent for them and that the ship they were on was lost; but it seems, now, they weren't on that ship. About a week ago he received a letter which he insists was written by his wife, that is, the woman he married in Paris—if he married her. Then just the day before yesterday, Madeline appeared, and if Madeline is French, I'm an Indian."

"What does John's brother think of it?"

"He seems to think it's wonderful that John has found his daughter after all these years, and he tells me that it's too bad that perhaps my marriage to John isn't legal, since Madeline's mother is still alive. He's tickled to death. John is very sorry about it all and wants to do what he calls 'the right thing'."

"You mentioned a Paul Garrett," I suggested. "Who is he?"

"Madeline calls him her fiance," Carol Macomber said bitterly.

"He came from France with her."

"That's what they say."

"And someone's been following you?"

"Every place I go. But it isn't only that. Early this afternoon as I was crossing the street, an automobile almost hit me. I think it tried to hit me. Last night, very late, someone tried my door. It was locked. I—"

The girl's voice broke off. She was biting her lips again.

"What can I do, Mrs. Macomber?" I asked slowly.

"You can—you can find out if it's true," the girl said promptly "You can find out

who's following me and why. You can tell me what I ought to do."

I lit a fresh cigarette from the butt I was holding. "Suppose I start by coming out to the house tonight," I suggested.

"Why?"

"To meet Madeline."

"John won't like it."

I grinned at her. "Then introduce me as an old friend."

Carol looked doubtful. "He won't like that, either."

"My first name," I said, "is Jerry."

Carol Macomber stiffened. "This is a business arrangement," she said bluntly. "Please keep it so, Mr. Duhan."

She wasn't giving an inch, that girl. I kept on grinning and stood up. "The business end," I told her, "will cost you fifty bucks a day and expenses. And a day is any part of a day. Don't blame me for the cost. It's an OPA regulation."

THAT crack didn't even bring a smile. Carol Macomber got to her feet. She crossed to the hall door and I followed her and opened it wide. "I hope neither of us will be sorry about this, Mr. Duhan," she said from the hall. "I am employing your services for a specified purpose, and for only so long as is necessary."

I said: "Check, Babe."

There was a man coming down the hall. I think if it hadn't been for him she might have stepped forward and slapped me. Anger flamed in her face. She started to say something but held it back and turned and headed for the elevators. The seams of her stockings were as straight as her lips had been.

I closed the door, walked back to my desk, lit a cigarette and pressed the buzzer to summon Miss Pomfret. Miss Pomfret was forty-seven. I had seen her social security card. She was as prim, precise and exact as her name indicated. She didn't approve of anything I did. I sometimes had the feeling that the only reason she went on working for me was in the hope of reforming me. She was everlastingly at it.

Miss Pomfret opened the door from the outer office. Her sharp, dark eyes searched the room for some evidence of carnal sin. She seemed disappointed to find nothing she could jump me about. "A gentleman is waiting to see you," she announced.

The people who came to see me, according to Miss Pomfret, fell into two classes. Men and women, or gentlemen and ladies. There were very few who were accorded the latter distinction.

Miss Pomfret's gentleman was five feet ten, about thirty, and had a nice tan. He wore a neat, dark suit, hideous tie and had polish on his shoes. A thin, frosty smile touched his lips as he moved through the door. It didn't reach his eyes and didn't stay on his face very long. He didn't offer to shake hands.

"I'm Paul Garrett," he said. "Your last visitor probably mentioned my name."

I shrugged my shoulders and sat down at the desk.

"What did she want?" Garrett demanded.

"You know, it's funny," I answered, "but I never remember things like that."

Garrett scowled at me. His eyes had narrowed. "Carol Macomber," he said finally, "is a very charming woman. She is suffering from a mild persecution complex. She has a feeling that John Macomber's daughter is planning to displace her in her husband's affections. She is a very high-strung woman and not wholly responsible for everything she says. She is also quite wealthy. Some men might want to take advantage of her condition and her wealth. I hope you will not make such a mistake."

That was the point at which to get up and take a poke at Miss Pomfret's gentleman, but I didn't. I just grinned at him and said: "Times are hard, Garrett. A man's got to make a living."

Garrett's scowl grew deeper. He took a turn around the room. "Look here," he said suddenly, "did she tell you the story of Madeline Le Ronde?"

I shook my head. "That's something else I don't remember."

"She told you," Garrett nodded. "Of course she would. She probably asked you to help her prove that Madeline is an impostor, and maybe it looks to you like a case you can make a lot of money on. Maybe you could, too, for John Macomber won't want more publicity than can be avoided. There will be some, of course. His first wife is still living. Macomber plans to arrange a quiet annulment of his marriage to Carol, after, of course, providing

for her. There is nothing else for him to do. Madeline is his daughter and his first wife is still living. He has irrefutable proof of this. Carol's suspicions can make front page news. Back her if you want to, but you'll just be wasting time. And if you try to cash in on the publicity value of the story, you may find yourself bucking a charge of blackmail."

"You're Madeline's fiance?" I asked.

Garrett nodded. "I met her in France, just after the war."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Drop the whole thing."

I shook my head. "Why not let me work on it and prove to Carol Macomber, if it's so easy, that Madeline's story is true."

Garrett looked doubtful. He took another turn around the room. "I'd have to call John Macomber," he said after a moment. "It might be a good plan at that."

I said: "Call him and let him know. Call him from here if you want to."

Paul Garrett was nodding. He came up to the desk and reached for the telephone.

CHAPTER TWO

Come Into My Parlor

I REACHED the Macomber residence just after eight thirty. The house was big, and even the thin shadows of the night couldn't hide its exterior ugliness. It had three floors, roof gables, bay windows. There was a good deal of ground around it, carefully landscaped. I rang the bell and stood waiting on the narrow front porch, aware of an eerie feeling which I couldn't identify. After a time I rang the bell again and suddenly a porch light came on and the door opened.

It was the butler who admitted me. I didn't know it was the butler. The man who opened the door didn't look like a butler is supposed to look. He was tall, broad shouldered, heavy, and had a dark, scowling face. He asked my name and got it and nodded. He took my hat and topcoat and said that the family was waiting in the library. He didn't say it. He growled it.

This was a wide entrance hall with doors opening to each side and a wall about twenty feet ahead. The room to the left was a parlor as big as a barn, cluttered up with chairs, tables divans and floor lamps. The library was to the right. You walked down

three steps to enter the library. It wasn't much smaller than the parlor and was just as jammed with furniture. There was a fireplace at the far end with a fire burning in the grate. A fireplace is supposed to make a room cheerful but this one didn't. The leather upholstery was dark, the walls were dark, the carpet was dark, and the few lights which were burning didn't do much about all this darkness.

Carol Macomber got up from her chair and came forward to meet me. She was wearing a dark evening gown which was properly tight and cut so low that it should have worried her. She had a cocktail glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She got rid of the cigarette and shook hands with me. She said: "Jerry, how perfectly delightful of you to drop by. We have been bored to death."

The words sounded as though they were from the lines of some show. Her smile was mechanical. Her hand was like ice. She made a pretense of pulling me forward.

"This is my husband, John," she said, indicating John Macomber. "There is his brother, Harry. And this is—this is Madeline."

"My daughter," said John Macomber.

"The other man," said Carol, "the one fixing a drink, is Paul Garrett."

I shook hands with Macomber and with his brother, Harry, who was tall, slender, and beginning to get bald. I nodded to Garrett and looked casually at Madeline. She was wearing a plaid skirt and a white blouse, and in spite of her careful make up she looked older than eighteen. Her eyes were brown and there were faint lines at the corners. She had brown hair and full red lips. She was as tall as Carol but seemed a little heavier.

"What will you have to drink, Jerry?" Garrett called. "And what's the rest of your name? Carol didn't tell us."

"Duhan," I answered. "And make it bourbon with just a little water."

They were handling this very neatly. They were letting Carol introduce me as an old friend and were accepting me on that basis.

"If Carol has told you much about me," said John Macomber, "Madeline may be something of a shock to you. She was to me. Two weeks ago, Mr. Duhan, I didn't know I had a daughter. Madeline and her

mother, or so I thought, left France for the United States on the *S S Rockhurst*, back in 1930. The *Rockhurst* was lost at sea and I presumed that both of them were dead. Until Madeline got here and told me the whole story, I never dreamed that she and her mother had sold their tickets at the last moment and that another mother and young daughter, traveling on their papers, were the ones who were lost."

I looked properly amazed. I stared from Madeline to John Macomber. I said that it must be wonderful to discover a daughter after seventeen years of thinking her dead.

John Macomber nodded. He walked over to Madeline's chair and sat on the arm of it and smiled. His smile was actually a little warm. It broke the hard-faced, business look. It made him seem almost human.

Harry Macomber came up on the other side of Madeline. "I've found a niece, too," he said.

Garrett brought me my drink. "I belong in that picture, Duhan," he said casually. "But right now there's no place for me."

Carol was standing near the fireplace. She was biting her lips. I had the impression that her body was rigid.

"Can she talk?" I asked, looking at Madeline.

They all laughed. Madeline said: "Certainly I can talk. My mother insisted that I learn to speak English proficiently."

There was a heavy accent in her speech. She reached up and took one of John Macomber's hands. She smiled at John's tall, thin-faced brother. It was all too perfect.

PAUL GARRETT drew me over into a corner. "Madeline looks older than eighteen, doesn't she?" he said under his breath.

I nodded my head.

"She served in the Underground, during the war," Garrett explained. "She was the leader of one of the youth organizations which made life hell for the Nazis during the occupation. Someday I'll tell you of some of her experiences. When I first saw her she was half starved, little more than skin and bone. Good food has brought her weight back, but it can't take the lines out of her face. A good many of the children in Europe are old before they're fifteen."

I nodded some more. The time hadn't come to say anything. This story of Garrett's was pretty good. It was a story a good many people would accept. It might even be true.

Garrett went to fix me another drink and John Macomber left Madeline's side and came over to where I was standing.

Macomber said: "Duhan, I've got to show you this letter. Until I get over the wonder of what's happened I've got to show it to everyone who meets Madeline. It's a letter from her mother. The first letter from Joan in almost twenty years."

As he was speaking he drew the letter from his pocket and held it out to me. The letter was dog-eared. It looked as though it had been read many times. It was written in English.

Dear John,

You must forgive my long silence. You must forgive what I have done. It was for the best. I would not have had you tied to an invalid. I could not have lived to see your love for me turn into hate, and that is what would have happened.

Perhaps it was not fair to keep Madeline from you, but I needed her more than you did. I am sending her to you now, for my release is at hand. She will have the locket you gave me and will tell you more than I can tell in this letter. She is a sweet child. Be good to her.

I love you, my dearest.

Joan

Macomber read the letter over my shoulder though I had an idea he knew it by heart. There were tears in his eyes when I handed it back.

"She was an invalid?" I said slowly.

"She was in an accident after I left. Her back was broken. She had made arrangements for her passage before the accident. A friend of hers sold the tickets and her papers to some woman just before the boat sailed. When the boat was lost and Joan and Madeline were reported among those missing, Joan decided to stay dead so far as I was concerned."

"How did she live all these years?" I demanded.

"Her people had money."

"And what does she mean by her release being at hand?"

"I have been in telephonic communication with Paris every day. She is quite ill. She may not live. The day after tomorrow I'm leaving for Paris by air."

"She's your daughter? You're sure of that?"

"Positive."

"She had the locket mentioned in the letter?"

"She had it, a locket I had given her mother."

"What kind of an accident was her mother in?"

"An automobile accident."

"Do you mind if I ask Madeline something?"

John Macomber shook his head. "No. Go right ahead. I want to co-operate with you in this."

I walked back to where Madeline was sitting. Harry Macomber was still at the side of her chair. Garrett was over near the fireplace, talking to Carol. He was talking pretty hard. Carol was shaking her head.

"Madeline," I said slowly, "I'm something of a dentist. You have awfully nice teeth."

Madeline smiled. She did have good teeth.

"I have a theory I've been working on," I continued. "I believe that exercise as well as good food is essential to dental health. Will you tell me about your mother? A woman who was bed-fast couldn't get much exercise. Does she have dentures?"

Madeline blinked. She hesitated for just a moment, then shook her head.

I GLANCED up at Harry Macomber. John's tall, thin brother had stiffened and there was a dark scowl on his face.

"That was a rather personal question, Duhan," he growled. "I don't think I liked it."

"A lot of people," I answered, "might not be ready to believe that Madeline was John Macomber's daughter. I'm in the process of finding out."

Harry Macomber glared at me. "And just who are you, anyhow?" he demanded.

"I'm a private detective."

The tall, thin man caught his breath. He stared past me at Carol. "So we have you to thank for this, do we, Carol? I think it's a rotten thing to have done."

"And you should be an expert on what is rotten, my dear Harry," Carol snap-ed.

Harry looked back at me. "You'd better leave, Duhan."

John Macomber shook his head. He said: "No, Harry. Mr. Duhan was right in what he said a moment ago. There will be people who will not believe that Madeline is my daughter. We have nothing to hide, Madeline or I. Mr. Duhan has a good record. I asked a few questions about him before he came here. I think it would be wise to give him all the help he needs in whatever investigation he wants to make."

"So you're in on this, too!" Harry grated. "I don't like it. I don't like it, John."

I turned to John Macomber. "Could I see Madeline alone for a few minutes?" I asked.

"Of course," John Macomber agreed. He smiled at Madeline. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," Madeline answered.

"Suppose you take him to my study," Macomber suggested.

Madeline nodded and stood up. She smiled at me and took my arm. "You'll not be too hard on me, will you?"

I said I wouldn't and I glanced around at the others. Harry still looked mad. Paul Garrett was frowning, and there was a slight frown on Carol's face. John Macomber was smiling encouragement at Madeline.

The study opened off of the library. It was a small room, but just as depressing as the library. Madeline let loose of my arm as soon as we were away from the others. She closed the curtains at the study window and then turned to face me. The smile on her face didn't look very natural. It looked forced, and her eyes were watchful.

I started toward her, grinning. I said, "Let's see if they taught you to kiss in English," and I grabbed at her.

She didn't scream. She took a sock at my face and missed, and then she clawed at me and tried to squirm free. I let her make it and stood there, holding a hand up to my face.

"You damned wolf!" she grated. "Keep your dirty paws off me!"

I grinned and stepped away. "So they even taught you slang as well as English! What was the name of the school, Madeline? And how many thousand miles was it from Paris?"

Madeline was breathing heavily. Her

fists were clenched. "Smart guy, huh," she breathed. "Smart guy."

"Smart enough to know you never saw Paris," I answered. "And I can make another guess. You're slightly older than eighteen. Say about ten years older."

There was a sound behind me. A cough. I jerked around. The butler who had admitted me was in the room and he didn't look any more pleasant than he had at the door. A gun was in his hand. It looked like an Army .45.

"You will raise your hands, Mr. Detective," said the butler. "And if you want to live you will not make a sound."

I raised my hands shoulder high. I shook my head at him. "It won't work," I told him. "You're backing the wrong horse. Madeline can't pass as eighteen, even with the Underground story. She can't pass as having been brought up in France. Others will see it the same as I did."

The butler said, "Go ahead," but he wasn't talking to me. He was talking to Madeline who had come up behind me. I sensed the movement of her arms as she raised them. I ducked and jerked around, but I couldn't get out of the way of the vase. It smashed down on my head. I wasn't even conscious of falling to the floor.

CHAPTER THREE

French Strip-Tease

I AWOKE in the gray darkness of a curtained room. I was on a bed, spread-eagled, my wrists and ankles tied to its four corners. I was stiff, cold, and when I moved my head the ache in it changed into a hammering pain. I tried to pull free but it was no use. I could shift my body a little but couldn't find any position which was comfortable.

The room wasn't large, but it was so dark I couldn't tell much about it. Where it was I couldn't guess. No traffic sounds reached into it, but after all, it was still night or probably early morning.

"Who are you?" whispered a voice from the darkness near the head of the bed. "Why did they bring you here?"

I twisted around to look in the direction of the voice. At first I couldn't make out a thing, and I wondered if my mind was playing tricks on me. There seemed to be

a vague movement in the shadows, but I was unable to distinguish anything more.

"Who are you?" said the voice again.

It was a woman's voice, still whispered, and there was a strange sound to the words, but they gave me courage. Anyone whispering in this room and asking such a question as she had asked couldn't be in league with those who had brought me here.

"I'm Jerry Duhan," I answered.

"Duhan?" said the voice. "It sounds French."

I got it, then, the reason her voice had seemed strange. It was because of a faint accent. And I knew who was in this room. It was Madeline. Not the Madeline who had crowned me with the vase but an authentic Madeline, who was John Macomber's daughter.

I said: "Madeline. That's your name, isn't it? Madeline Macomber."

Again I detected a movement in the shadows and as the girl moved nearer I could distinguish the outline of her figure. She was standing close against the wall. She said: "Yes, I'm Madeline. How did you know?"

"I met the other Madeline," I answered. "The one who is taking your place. I was supposed to look her over and say she was all right. I didn't say the right thing. Who brought me here?"

"The man they call Crispin and Eddie Krick."

Those names didn't mean a thing to me. "Who brought you here?" I asked.

"The same two men."

That bit of information didn't help either. I said: "Where are we?"

"I do not know, exactly. We are in a large house. On this floor there are six rooms like this one. From the windows I can see trees and beyond them a street."

"They let you run around any place you wish?"

"No. They keep me locked in a room but locks do not bother me. The Nazis also depended too much on locks."

There was a sudden bitterness in the girl's voice.

"If you can handle locks as easily as that," I suggested, "why didn't you get out of here?"

"They took my clothes, all of them. If I only had a needle—I never realized before how important a needle was."

I stared toward her, straining my eyes. She probably had a blanket draped around her shoulders, and it was undoubtedly this which had made her figure so indistinct.

"When will they be back?" I asked.

"In the morning. Maybe sooner. I don't know. I never know. When they brought you here, they came in to see me. They wanted to know if mother has false teeth."

I grinned in the darkness. I said: "Does she?"

"Yes," Madeline answered, "but I said she did not."

"You use your head, don't you."

"I have had to. Much that I have told them is not true. I said mother's hair was still black. It is not. It is almost pure white. I said that mother's face was disfigured in the accident long ago. It was not. She has a beautiful face."

"Is she quite ill?"

"She is dying of what you call cancer. I did not want to leave her, but she said it would make her happy if she could know I was with her John before she died."

"You might start working on these ropes while you talk," I suggested.

Madeline came closer. She dropped to her knees at the side of the bed. "What will you do?" she asked almost breathlessly.

"Plenty," I said grimly, "if I have a chance."

"They always come together, this Crispin and Eddie Krick," Madeline went on. "They watch each other while they watch me. They argue about which one is to get me when the boss needs me no longer. Who is this boss?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Either Harry Macomber, your uncle, or a man named Paul Garrett. Maybe both of them."

"She came once—the girl who has taken my place. I did not like her."

One of my hands was free now. I rolled over and started working to free the other. Madeline came around the bed to help.

"How did they get you, Madeline?" I asked.

"I went to my father's house when I got here. It was in the afternoon, eight days ago. It was Crispin who answered the door. He seemed to expect me. He took me into a large room and said he would call my father. He came back later with a glass of milk. He said he thought I might

like it, and it looked very good. We have not had much milk in France.. I drank it."

"Doped," I muttered.

"It is an old trick but I expected to find no Nazis here. That is what they are like. Nazis!"

Again that bitterness was in her voice. I sat up. Both hands were free now. Madeline moved to the foot of the bed and started untying my ankles. I had an idea where we were. Crispin had admitted the girl. Crispin was probably the butler who had admitted me and who had held a gun on me in John Macomber's study while the ersatz Madeline had conked me over the head with a vase. The Macomber home was rather large. If the third floor wasn't being used it would make an ideal prison. It was doubtful if Carol Macomber ever came up here. In fact, Carol probably spent as little time in this dreary house as possible. If the real Madeline was held here, she was on tap for any immediate information which the girl who was taking her place might need. And up here, too, had been a convenient place to leave me while the boss, whoever he was, made some arrangement to dispose of a body. The disposition of a body is more of a problem than most people recognize.

MADELINe finished untying my ankles and I swung around and sat on the edge of the bed. The hammering pain in my head was going away but not so swiftly that I had forgotten it. My gun was missing from the holster under my arm. I needed a weapon, a good, heavy club.

"Where do they come in?" I asked suddenly.

"There is a door at the end of the hall."

"Lights?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever try making a lot of noise?"

"Once, just after they brought me here. Crispin beat me. Eddie Krick made him stop. That's when they started quarreling about me."

"We'll take care of Crispin," I promised grimly. "Show me the door."

I got to my feet and reached for Madeline's hand. She had refastened the blanket around her so that her shoulder and arm were free. I could distinguish the pale color of her skin. Her hand was warm and there was strength in her fingers. She led

me through the darkness to a door and down a carpeted hallway. At the end of the hallway I fumbled for the light switch and clicked it on and looked at Madeline.

She was bare-legged, bare-footed and about five feet four. The top of her head came about to my chin. Her hair was as dark as the hallway had been a moment before. She was nicely put together—I could tell that in spite of the bulky blanket, which was wrapped around her waist and pulled up over her back and across one shoulder and then tucked in at the waist again. She had lovely dark eyes, a nice little nose and high cheek bones. Even without makeup, she had what it takes.

"Do you like the way I look?" she asked frankly.

I chuckled and nodded my head.

"I could look better," she said, frowning. "Powder and rouge would help some. And clothes. Clothes will do a lot for a woman."

She looked like a little girl standing there bare-footed and wrapped in the blanket. I grinned at her and said: "You'll do, Madeline. . . . Where is a chair, a good, heavy chair?"

"In the room you were in."

I walked back there, found the chair and broke off the two front legs. Madeline had followed me. She watched me from the door.

"One for each of us," she approved.

I nodded. I said: "Yours is to tap a pipe. You'll find one in the bathroom under the wash basin, most likely. Tap it as though you were tapping in code. Irregularly. Tap it—"

"I can tap in code," the girl interrupted.

"Then use your code."

"What do I tap in code?"

"Anything. Just make a noise. Maybe Crispin and Eddie Krick will hear it and come up here to see what's wrong. I'll be back of the door when it opens."

"They'll have guns, Jerry Duhan."

"A man with a broken head can't use a gun," I said grimly. "You go tap out the message, any message."

Madeline took her chair leg. She looked up at me very solemnly. She said: "Jerry Duhan, I think you are all right. I think we could have used you if you had been in France when the Nazis were there."

"Uncle Sam did use me," I answered, "to

help chase them out. Go find that pipe and start beating on it."

Madeline moved up the hall and I walked down to the door at the far end. It opened into the hall and I stood where I would be behind it when it opened. Madeline started tapping and I clicked off the lights and waited. Madeline was handling her end all right. She would tap for a while, then pause, then start in again. She made the tapping irregular enough so that it couldn't fail to attract attention if anyone was awake. I stood at the door listening, and suddenly I heard footsteps and the muffled sound of voices. I gripped my chair leg tighter. There would be two men, at least. I couldn't hit them both at the same time. I had only one chance, to wait until both were in the hall and then move as swiftly as I could.

A key grated in the lock. The lock turned. The door was thrust open. Someone clicked on the lights and a heavy voice said, "Damn her. She'll be sorry for this. She gets tied up this time for sure."

A man moved into the range of my vision beyond the edge of the door. A second man was just behind him. They came to a momentary stop and I heard one of them catch his breath. I knew what had stopped them. I caught the same glimpse that they did of Madeline darting across the hall, her blanket slipping from her shoulder and waist as she ducked into one of the rooms. Talk about a strip-tease act, Madeline handled that one just about perfectly. My club was lifted as she appeared. It smashed down on Crispin's head as he stood there in the hall, momentarily startled. I swung the club up again and brought it down at the other man.

He saw it coming. He twisted sideways and got his arm up. A sharp cry broke from his lips as the chair leg hit his arm and forced it down and scraped the front of his face. He staggered against the wall. He was holding a gun and he jerked it up, but I slammed the chair-leg at him again and this time I caught him just above the bridge of his nose. He went down then as hard and as cold as Crispin.

Madeline joined me as I stood over the two men. The blanket was again securely in place. She stooped over and picked up the gun Eddie Krick had dropped, and she handled it as though she had held a gun

before. She looked at me and said: "Yes, Jerry Duhan, you are all right."

They were both unconscious. Maybe they were dead. I didn't know and just then I didn't care. I found a gun in Crispin's pocket and slipped it into my holster. I took his keys. I took Crispin by the shoulders and dragged him into the room I had occupied. Madeline helped me with the other man.

"What would you like?" I asked her, grinning. "Crispin's dark suit, or the light blue pin-stripe Eddie Krick is wearing."

"His," Madeline said, pointing to Eddie Krick, "if I can have a bath afterwards."

I got to work and stripped them both, and after Madeline was dressed in Eddie Krick's shirt and rolled-up trousers, I took every stitch off of them and made a bundle of the clothing. This notion of confiscating a person's clothing wasn't bad at all. When Crispin and Eddie Krick woke up, they wouldn't do much running around until they could find something to wear. And to make it even more difficult, I locked them in the room.

Madeline was waiting for me in the hall. She had Eddie Krick's gun in her hand and she looked more youthful than ever in his shirt and trousers. Her eyes were sparkling. She said, "What now, Jerry Duhan?"

I turned toward the hall door. I said: "Downstairs. And don't get too free with that gun until you know what you're shooting at."

CHAPTER FOUR

Accent on Violence

THE stairway led to a back hall on the second floor. A dim light showed us the location of a passage to the front hall, and I tried the first bedroom door we came to. It was unlocked. I opened it and listened for a moment. Whoever slept here was snoring.

While Madeline waited in the hall, I stepped into the room and crossed to the bed. I struck a match and in the quick flame of its light saw Carol Macomber. She was lying on her back with her arms and shoulders out of the covers and she was wearing some hideous beauty mask. She didn't look nearly so gorgeous as she had in my office.

"Bum guess," I whispered to Madeline when I reached the hall again, "but John Macomber's room should be next."

I tried the next door. It was Macomber's room, all right, and Macomber was snoring louder than his wife. I brought Madeline in and closed the door and clicked on the lights. The connecting door to Carol's room was closed.

"There he is," I said to Madeline. "John Macomber. Your father."

Madeline moved up to the bed and stood looking down at him. Tears were suddenly in her eyes. Macomber moved restlessly in the bed. He turned half over, stopped snoring. After a moment his eyes opened and he looked vaguely at Madeline, and then he came abruptly wide awake and sat up. His hair was mussed from contact with the pillow and he needed a shave. He stared at Madeline, then looked at me, then looked back at Madeline again.

"I don't get this," he said slowly. "What are you doing here, Duhan? Who is this with you?"

"It's going to take a good deal of explaining, Mr. Macomber," I answered. "To put it briefly, this is your daughter, and if you give her a chance I think she'll be able to prove it."

Macomber was frowning. He shook his head. "This isn't my daughter. My daughter is—"

"When I was born," Madeline interrupted, "my mother told me you took me in your arms and said, *Here is beauty I could never paint, no matter how long I tried.* Of course I was not beautiful. New babies never are. And there is another thing I must tell you. I did not swallow the ruby ring you lost. At least, I do not think I swallowed it."

Macomber's eyes had widened. "The ruby ring," he whispered. "I had forgotten all about it."

"Have you forgotten mother's crooked little toe?" Madeline asked. "Look at mine. I have it, too. My feet are dirty, for they took away my shoes, but look at my toe, Father."

John Macomber stared down at the foot. Madeline lifted. He wiped a hand across his face. He bit at his lips. "Duhan," he whispered. "Duhan, am I going crazy?"

I shook my head. "No, but you're in a mess. Suppose your marriage to Carol is

illegal because your first wife is still living. Whom does that make your heir?"

"Madeline's mother."

"And if Madeline's mother dies?"

"Madeline, of course."

"Then it would be nice to be Madeline, wouldn't it, if her mother died and something happened to you?"

John Macomber gulped and I could watch him figuring this out, could tell almost the exact second that he got it. His real daughter had been kidnapped, an ersatz Madeline had been put in her place, his first wife was dying. When she was dead, the girl established as his daughter would next in line. Carol was out of it. Carol wasn't legally his wife.

"Who is she, this other girl?" Macomber demanded.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Suppose we find out."

Macomber looked at Madeline again, and suddenly Madeline was on her knees at the bed and John Macomber reached out and touched her hair. There were tears in his eyes. "It's like your mother's," he said softly. "Just like your mother's."

There was a sound at the door and I jerked around, my hand lifting to my gun. But I didn't whip it out. Instead, I raised both hands, shoulder high. The door was open and Paul Garrett was standing just inside the room. He was covering me with a gun. There was a tight, unpleasant smile on his lips. At that moment, Miss Pomfret's gentleman didn't look much like a gentleman.

"Very pretty," he sneered, glancing toward the bed. "Too bad I have to break it up."

Macomber didn't look frightened. He threw back the covers and swung his feet to the floor. Madeline glanced over her shoulder. She stood up and edged toward the side of the room.

Macomber got to his feet. "Garrett, what's the meaning of this?" he asked sharply.

"Figure it out for yourself," Garrett answered.

"I don't like it."

There was a tight, humorless smile on Garrett's face. "Lie down on the bed, Macomber," he said bluntly. "Put your hands together behind your back."

Macomber shook his head. "You'll never



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Philip Ketchum

get away with it. You never will!"

THE door to Carol's room was opening. I moved my hands in closer to my chest, closer to the gun in my shoulder holster. Madeline was at the opposite wall near a long table. I saw her reach out and pick up a heavy, brass book end.

"Get down on that bed," Garrett snarled. Madeline's arm drew back and at the same moment I heard Carol's scream of warning. "Paul, the girl!"

Garrett's eyes jerked toward Carol and then at Madeline. The book end was sailing through the air. Garrett ducked and at the same moment I clawed for my gun. Carol was screaming again as Garrett swung his gun toward me, but Garrett was off balance and he missed. I fired twice and saw him stiffen and drop his arm and clutch at his stomach. He took a half step forward and then sat down. He was holding both hands at his stomach, now, and was rocking from side to side.

I moved forward and picked up Garrett's gun. I carried it back to Madeline, who was leaning against the table. "Here," I told her. "Hang onto this gun and watch the woman who screamed."

Carol had come into the room. She had apparently been awakened by our talking and had opened the connecting door to watch. That was it. Watch. For she had called Garrett by his first name and had screamed a warning to him. I glanced at her and saw her crossing to Macomber's bed. Macomber was sitting down. There was a glassy look in his eyes.

"Darling, you're all right, aren't you," Carol cried as she reached the bed. "You weren't hit. Tell me you're all right!"

"He's all right," I answered. "And he heard what you said in the door. Pretty soon he's going to be wondering about the butler you hired and the man named Eddie Krick and the room upstairs where Madeline has been held. Pretty soon he's going to start asking you questions, Carol. Very pointed questions."

Carol got to her feet. She came over to where I was standing and grabbed me by the arm. She leaned up against me. "You don't understand, Jerry," she whispered. "They made me do it. They made me."

Madeline pushed in between us. She did

House of Homicide

it by the simple expedient of shoving Carol away and poking her gun into Carol's stomach.

"Tell me," Madeline said sharply. "Tell me who made you do what."

Carol bit her lips. She backed up one step and then another. She turned and started running for her room but Madeline caught her, caught her in a football tackle and brought her to the floor and then scrambled quickly to her feet.

"I can take over from here," Madeline said, glancing around at me. "I did not like it in that room. I did not like it without clothes. She will tell me the truth or she will never be pretty again. Is that all right?"

I said it was all right and then looked around at Macomber. He was just coming out of the fog. "Pile out of bed, Macomber," I said gruffly. "We've got work to do. While you call the police, I'll see if the ersatz Madeline is still around and check up on the two fellows we left on the third floor."

The Madeline who wasn't Madeline was gone. She had apparently heard the shooting and pulled out with little more clothing than the real Madeline had been wearing when I first saw her. The two men we had left on the third floor were still there. When I got back to Macomber's bedroom, Macomber had telephoned the police and had lifted Garrett to his bed. He was doing what he could for him. I took a look into Carol's bedroom. Madeline had backed Carol up in a corner and Carol was talking. She was talking furiously, as though her very life depended on it.

* * *

We saw John Macomber off at the airport, two days later, on the first leg of his trip to France. It was a fast plane which he was riding but it wouldn't be fast enough for him. He had sopped up everything Madeline could tell him about her mother. He was as eager as an adolescent, love-sick boy, and he knew that Madeline's mother was dying. I had a lot of respect for him as Madeline and I watched him board the plane.

The whole affair was cleaned up. John Macomber, who had close friends in the police department, had managed to smother most of the story in the press. Eddie

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Philip Ketchum

Krick, who had been Carol Macomber's chauffeur, and Crispin, the butler, were in jail on an extortion charge, though whether or not they would ever come to trial, I didn't know. John Macomber, either to keep the story out of the papers or due to some mistaken notion of what he owed Carol, had been very easy on them. Carol, who had planned the whole thing with Paul Garrett, had signed a confession and had disappeared.

Macomber just let her go. She and Garrett had planned to gain control of Macomber's money through the substitution of a daughter whom they could control. They had sold Harry Macomber on the girl's identity and had picked me to make what they hoped would look like an official investigation and quiet any suspicions which might crop up in the future. Garrett was dead. Who the ersatz Madeline was or where she had gone we didn't know and John Macomber had told me to forget her. He had found a daughter and his first love and was feeling generous.

I was thinking of all this as I drove Madeline home.

I took a quick look at her. She wasn't wearing just a blanket now, or a man's suit which didn't fit her. She had on a blouse, jacket and skirt and her face was made up

"What are you thinking of, Jerry?" she asked suddenly.

I looked straight ahead, stepped on the gas to beat a light and then slowed down. "I was wondering about something," I answered. "I was wondering if the blanket slipped or if it was accidental."

"What blanket?" Madeline asked.

"Remember when the two men came upstairs?" I said, grinning. "They entered the hall. They might have rushed right on down it before I could conk them on the skull. But they saw something. They stopped."

I glanced at Madeline again. All the red in her cheeks hadn't come out of a box.

"You were not supposed to be looking," she said finally. "You were supposed to be hitting two men over the head. Someday I shall get even with you."

I kept on driving. What could a guy say to that?

THE END

Rhapsody in Blood

(Continued from page 67)

found that Jackson Marks already had served time on a blackmail charge. The nickel-plated was traced to him. And they found the clipping about Ruby St. George's engagement to Lamont, taken from Oxley's pocket, in Marks'. They were able to tie it all up.

The thing that gave Flynn trouble was getting Lieutenant Ganza to squash the real story on Aileen O'Malley, to keep her out of it and change the facts about her death a bit. He had to use all his weight and all his influence to do it. He finally made the Lieutenant see what it would do to Bon to know the truth about her kid sister.

So it went down in the records that Jackson Marks had murdered both Oliver Smith and the private investigator, Oxley. It went down that Aileen O'Malley had jumped from the window of her sister's room, crazed with grief over Smitty's death. . . .

It was after midnight on the day the burlesque season ended. Ricky Flynn got Bon, walked along the quiet streets, until they found a small park and a bench in the soft summer moonlight. After a long while, Bon turned to him, put her face against his shoulder.

"Honey," she said, "you know that novelty number of mine that I do on the stage—with the canopied bed? Rick, every time I did that act, I used to think of you."

He put his arms around her. "You must be psychic. I was just thinking about that act. From now on, you're only going to do special performances—for your husband. I won't be a big audience for you, Baby, but you'll never find a more enthusiastic one."

THE END

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Robert Martin

(Continued from page 32)

"Look, Sonny," I said, and I tried to keep myself under control. "Doc Valentine was a good friend of mine. He trusted me, and he trusted you—because I said he could trust you. But you had a fourteen-year-old itch for his wife, and his wife's money, and so you get yourself transferred here to see if you can do anything about it. You find that you can do plenty. The opportunity I handed you was tailor-made. So you stick a knife into Doc and try to pin his murder on a young M.D. who was sincerely trying to help Doc's wife. But you didn't care as long as you thought you could get the woman and the woman's money . . ." I paused, and I found myself trembling a little.

"Go on," Parks said mockingly. "Don't stop now. You've got me on the edge of my seat."

"I've talked too damn much and too long," I said. "But I'm all through talking now. Give me that gun of yours—before I come over there and take it away from you."

"Easy, Boss," he said softly. "Did I ever tell you that I was the fastest in my class at the agency school at getting a gun out of a shoulder clip and firing it?"

"Show me," I said.

His hand clawed for his gun, and in the same instant I kicked violently against the floor lamp. It crashed against the book shelves and went out. In the dark room Don Parks' gun spat yellow flame, but I was on the floor and I heard the slug spat against the wall behind me. I rolled over behind his chair while he shot twice more, blindly. I jumped up and my fingers found the short hair of his head. I slammed my .38 down hard, and he struggled briefly before he slumped into the chair. I groped my way to the wall switch.

When the overhead lights came on I walked over to him and took his pearl-handled .32 from his limp grasp. He stirred a little, and opened his eyes. He watched me silently as I crossed the room to the telephone.

"I'm calling the police, Sonny," I said grimly.

He smiled a little. "Roger," was all he said.

THE END

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING-

(OR IS IT?)



BY GROUCHO MARX

WHAT do you want to save up a lot of money for? You'll never need the stuff.

Why, just think of all the wonderful, wonderful things you can do *without* money. Things like—well, things like—

On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

For instance, how are you ever going to build



that Little Dream House, without a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

And how are you going to send that kid of yours to college, without the folding stuff?

Maybe you think he can work his way through by playing the flute.

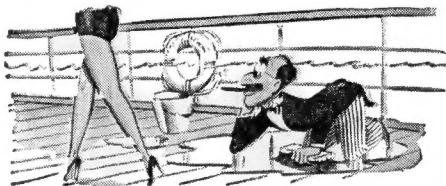
If so, you're crazy. (Only three students have ever worked their way through college by playing the flute. And they had to stop eating for four years.)

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And how are you going to do that world-traveling you've always wanted to do? Maybe you think you can stoke your way across, or scrub decks. Well, that's no good. I've tried it. It interferes with shipboard romances.

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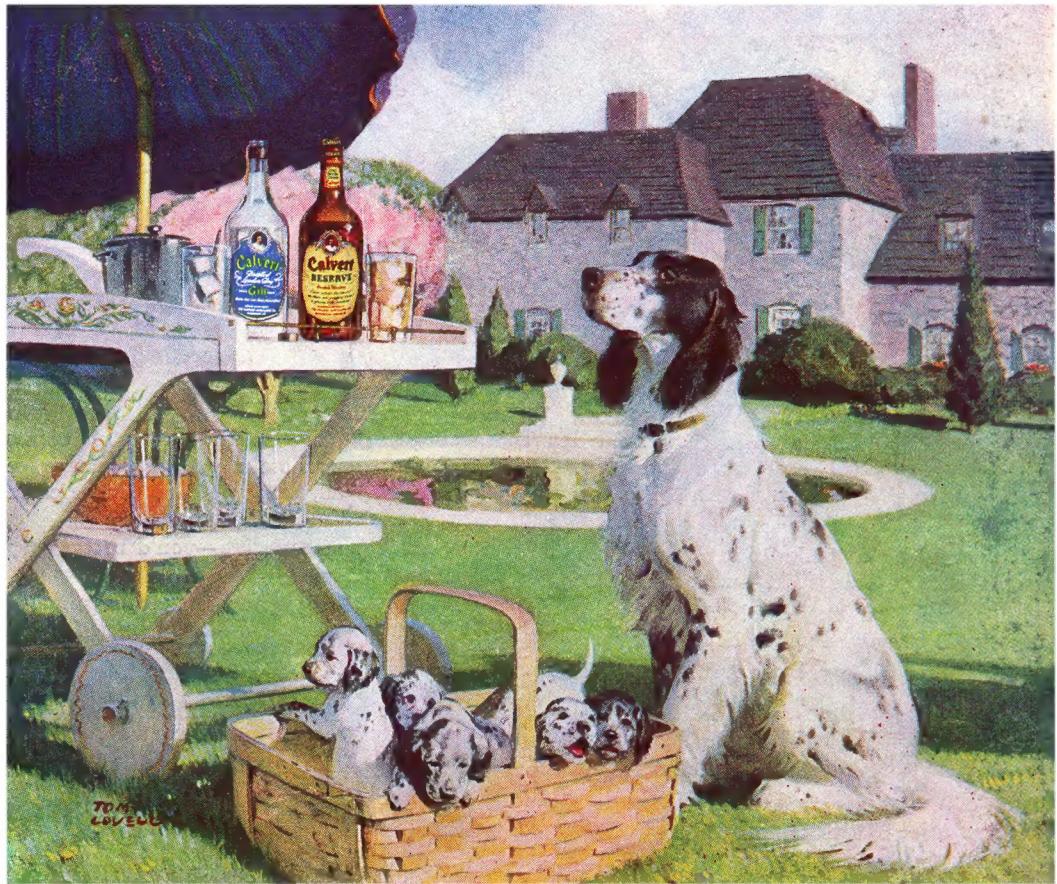


Millions of Americans—smart cookies all—have found the Payroll Plan the easiest and best way to save.

So stick with the Payroll Plan, son—and you can't lose.

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